







A GARDEN OF MEMORIES

MRS. AUSTIN

LIZZIE'S BARGAIN



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LIZZIE'S BARGAIN

BY

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· A GARDEN OF MEMORIES ·

[This GARDEN OF MEMORIES holds a sad and most tender memory for me. Thus far in my work I have had my sister's sympathy, and I shall have it no more. Even in her weakness she cared for the beginning of this story, chose it to be a remembrance of her, came, as it were, with faltering steps, a little way into my garden, and I feel as if her grave were among its blossoms. Often as I have wished that work of mine might better deserve to live, I never wished it more than I do at this moment, when, having finished this, I write upon it the name of CONSTANCE.]

# A GARDEN OF MEMORIES

## I

### WITHOUT

"June weather,  
Blue above lane and wall."

THE June sunshine lighted a dull little street, where a row of small houses, mean, dirty, dilapidated, faced a high wall. It was about three o'clock, and Garden Lane was almost deserted, the children being at school, and their elders at the factory. Two or three loud-voiced, slatternly women appeared and disappeared at the cottage doors, looking after the babies who seemed to have casually dropped into the squalid life of the place, and the decrepit old folks who were near to dropping out of it.

Even in its peaceful condition the lane did not seem likely to attract visitors. Yet a couple of well-dressed men lingered there, talking earnestly, and had already lingered for ten or fifteen minutes, though there were pleasanter spots within easy reach. The elder of the two, a tall, neat, gray-whiskered man of sixty or more, stood on the footpath, with his back to the cottages, and poked at the dust with a slim gold-headed cane. His companion, much younger than himself, had halted in the roadway, and was speaking rather defiantly, with his hands in his pockets



It was natural enough that the elder man should raise his eyes from time to time, and that they should rest on the wall that faced him. But the other had his back to it, and it was less obvious why he should cast quick glances over his shoulder, as if the wall made a third in the conversation. They were curt, half-hostile glances, and yet it was the pleasantest thing to look at in Garden Lane. It was a substantial piece of old-fashioned brickwork, which rose with an air of strength, almost of stateliness, above its sordid surroundings. Its base was polluted with the filth of the street, and defaced with smears and chalk-marks, but higher up it took the southern radiance on its warmly coloured bricks, touched here and there with lines and patches of bronze-tinted moss, and over its crest, against the blue June, flickered little wanton sprays of ivy and vine. By standing very near the unsavoury cottages the sunlit boughs of trees within the enclosure might be descried.

The two men, however, betrayed no such extreme curiosity. There was a small door just opposite, set in the wall, with a projecting ledge of brickwork above it, on which a tuft or two of snapdragon grew, and thin, dry grasses seeded airily. Evidently it was seldom opened, for the children had made little erections of stones, and dirt, and oyster-shells, upon the threshold. The elder man's eyes lingered familiarly on the little entrance, as if he could see some pleasant sight beyond, but the other, when he turned to look, ignored the doorway, and flung his glances higher, where the glowing line of red bounded the sultry sky.

"You know me," he said, with a touch of resentment in his tone. "You ought to know me well. You know I don't want to do anything but what is fair and right. But, I put it to you, am I not offering more than it is worth?"

"Decidedly more than it would be worth to any other man," the other agreed. "And I think," he added with a smile, "that you are offering a little more than it is really worth to you."

"Well then?" said the young man crushingly.

But his companion made no answer. He continued to smile, looking down and drawing vague lines in the dust at his feet.

"Why don't you tell her she'll never get such an offer again?"

The point-blank question roused the other to stare and exclaim, "Bless the man! Do you suppose I *haven't* told her?"

"Well then? Why doesn't she take it? What more does she want?"

"No more. Unluckily for you she doesn't want so much. She simply wants her own house and garden. She won't sell."

"But why? What reason does she give?"

"Do we ask a lady for a reason?" said the other. "If we do we don't get one."

The fierce young man seemed to take the little commonplace speech as a weighty truth. "Heaven help me!" he said, "what have I ever done that I should have to do business with a woman?"

"Don't trouble yourself too much about that, Brydon. I don't think you'll have any business to do with her."

Brydon stood pondering—incredulous, yet gloomy. "But it's absurd," he said. "Look here—I'm not unreasonable. If the place had been a long while in the family, if it had even been her home when she was a child—well, I suppose it might be called sentimental to refuse a good offer, but it would be the kind of thing one could understand, you know."

"Certainly," the other assented.

"One could understand it," Brydon continued, "and, if it were only a question of a good offer, I, for one, could respect it. Yes, with all my heart."

He paused, giving his companion time for an affirmative gesture, then went on.

"But what has Miss Wynne to do with the place? She bought it—how long ago? A year? A year and a half? Well, a year and a half, then. I suppose from what they tell me she only happened to know of it because she was once here for two or three months when the Macleans had it; they say she was a sort of companion to old Miss Maclean in those days. I shouldn't have cared much to go as companion to Mary Anne myself, and she doesn't seem to have liked it long! But a year or two later, when the house was empty, back she comes with money and a new name, and buys it. Cheap too! Isn't that so?"

"Just so."

"Well, is there anything in that to make a woman refuse a good offer for it, when she knows what her refusal means? Look at those cottages—*look* at them, Eddington!" he threw out his hand towards them with sudden passion. "Are they fit for her fellow-creatures to live in? There they must live, however, there they must crowd together beyond all chance of cleanliness or decency, there they must die, because Miss Wynne has taken a fancy to keep the only bit of ground on which I could build them decent dwellings, for a flower-garden! The devil take such fancies, say I!"

"Of course you feel strongly about it," said the other. "It's only natural. But, after all, Miss Wynne bought and paid for her house—you can't confiscate people's property, you know."

"But what does she want it for—tell me that! The house is well enough, but there are better ones on the Daleham Road. And as for a garden—is she bound to have a garden in the densest and dirtiest part of the town? They say Norman's Folly is to be sold—why doesn't she buy that? She would get a really good garden there."

"So is this a good garden. Do you know it?"

Brydon shook his head. "The factory is on one side of it, of course, but we have no windows that way. And my uncle never got on with the Macleans, you know. He used to say he thought he could have put up with old Teddy Maclean, but he could *not* stand Mary Anne, so we didn't visit."

"Well, you know Miss Wynne?" said Eddington, beginning to move slowly along the footpath.

"I have met her," the young man answered, "if you mean that. Somebody introduced us at the vicarage one day. She made me a little bow and a remark on the weather."

The other smiled. "She can be better company than that."

"Very likely. But I would have you remark that it is Miss Wynne's room I want, and not her company at all. I think I should prefer the Macleans."

"I daresay! You think you could have bullied poor old Teddy, and had your own way."

"But I could not have bullied Mary Anne! Still I think I could have made a bargain with her."

"Why not try with Miss Wynne?" said Eddington, as they emerged into the High Street. "Why leave all the arguments to me? You might be more persuasive."

"Oh! Persuasive!"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I've no arguments but pounds, shillings, and pence,"

the young mill-owner replied. "Will they sound bigger from my mouth than from yours?"

"You might find others."

"No. She doesn't care for the weavers and their wretched cottages. And, being a fine young lady, she probably thinks drainage an unpleasant subject, and would not thank me for explaining to her that she may be poisoned one of these days by the filth of Garden Lane."

"Well," said Eddington, "I can't say whether she cares for weavers and drainage, or not. But I don't think she cares for pounds, shillings, and pence."

"Tell me," said Brydon abruptly, "do you know her reason for refusing to sell? Keep it a secret if you like, only tell me, do you *know* it?"

"I do not."

"Well then, I'll try." He had spoken hitherto in a defiant and rather masterful fashion, but now he suddenly stood revealed as a shy young man. "I'll do what I can," he said, as if he needed the assurance of his own reiterated pledge. "But it won't be any good. I wish she *were* Mary Anne!"

"Thank you. I prefer Miss Wynne for a client."

Brydon paused for a moment with his great dark gray eyes fixed upon vacancy. "Yes, I'll try," he repeated. "Well, good-bye for the present."

"Stop," said Eddington. "Miss Wynne will have some people there to-morrow—tennis and afternoon tea, you know. Suppose you go with me? We are very good friends, she and I; I'll undertake to promise you a welcome."

"But I don't care for tennis."

"Very well, then, you can hand teacups. It will be all the better for me."

Brydon hesitated. "But how is one to do any talking? That kind of thing is nothing but idiotic chatter."

"Oh, you can't drive a bargain then and there, and pay the money down with the tennis players for witnesses! No, no, you may leave your cheque-book at home. But, all the same, you had better come with me—see how the land lies, and have a look at the walled paradise—you may understand Miss Wynne better after that."

"But I hardly ever go to these stupid afternoon affairs; I'd much rather be at my work—I hate 'em," growled the young man. "Well, I'll go—what time?" he added in a hurry, as if he were afraid that Eddington might give up the idea.

The other smiled a little. "All right—call for you at four," he said.

## II

### WITHIN

"Roses that down the alleys shine afar,  
And open, jasmine-muffled lattices,  
And groups under the dreaming garden-trees."

MR. THOMAS. BRYDON, standing a little apart from the tennis players, eyed the coveted garden with stealthy eagerness. He knew its precise extent and shape better than any other person present, but the vision which had haunted him for months was that of a somewhat irregular four-sided patch, washed over with a uniform tint of light green, bounded by pen-and-ink lines, and conveniently supplied with a scale of measurement and the points of the compass. The delineation was accurate enough, yet the reality took him a little by surprise.

He had had some idea of the ordinary suburban garden, with its neat machine-mown lawn and yellow gravel walks, its slim young trees, laburnum and lime, and its gay stripes and masses of bedding plants. He had walked many a time in such gardens, and remembered their well-raked borders, their standard roses bearing pendent labels, and their latest novelties in variegated foliage. He knew the rock-work in a shady corner, dotted here and there with little homesick ferns. All these things were familiar to him.

But not this walled enclosure, where everything told of long continuance. So many generations had laboured within its bounds, each its allotted span, so many seasons of sunshine and rain had quickened the great trees whose white roots were groping far below, that it seemed as if one need only turn a spadeful of the deep black earth for buried memories to germinate and bloom. Spring flowers here were but the last links in a long garland, stretching across the years to hands that tended those same blossoms in pleasant old-fashioned times. It was like the quaintest masquerade, only to think of the women who had walked in that garden. Who was the first—the woman for whom the pleasure-ground was planted? And was Mary Wynne to be the last?

Already it was but a narrow plot compared to what it once had been. Tall buildings hemmed it in, turning blank walls on its green seclusion. Here were massive warehouses, there, above a quivering screen of poplar leaves, rose a heaped confusion of tiled roofs, a bit of tærid colour in the midsummer sunlight, slopes of varied steepness, blackened in places with soot and moss. Little long-drawn clouds drifted from their clustered chimneys across the western sky. There was a gray glitter of glass in distant windows, but it was strange how remote all eyes seemed to be from Miss Wynne's shady lawn.

Half a minute had sufficed to give Brydon a distinct impression of his surroundings. Then with no change of attitude he lowered his glance and surveyed the company. His young hostess had given him the welcome that Eddington had promised, and had only turned away to greet a later arrival. He looked after her, curiously, anxiously—his impression of her was anything but distinct. How was this? She had talked to him for at least a couple of minutes, and Brydon believed himself to be



quick at reading faces. He began to suspect that perhaps he had never looked at her while she spoke.

The tennis party was an ordinary specimen of such gatherings in a provincial town. There were a good many ladies. Elderly clergymen had brought their wives and daughters, and the wives and daughters of busier men had come with apologies for their absentees. Two or three lads, just old enough to be reckoned as grown-up from a lawn-tennis point of view, loitered about, always keeping together, and looking on the women, the old people, and polite manners generally, as hindrances to rational enjoyment. The legal profession was represented by Mr. Eddington, smiling and talking in every direction, and a self-possessed junior partner. There was a good-looking country squire who had driven in, with two sisters and a cousin, from a manor-house some four or five miles away. And finally there was a curate from his lodgings in the High Street.

Some of the girls were pretty, but Brydon's eyes seeking Miss Wynne lingered only on a tall, willowy young woman, as distinct from all the rest as if she were a foreigner. In point of fact, her dwelling-place was nothing more remote than Kensington, whence, being a little tired, she had come for ten days' change, and was restfully going through the three tennis parties, one flower-show, and one reopening of a church, which her friends had offered as a round of gaiety.

Brydon's glance encountered hers, for she was gazing fixedly at him from under her slanted parasol while she talked to Mr. Eddington. His story interested her, it was an excitement, an enthusiasm, a struggle for mastery, and the issue was uncertain. Perhaps it might be divined by a little study of the young man. She was like a traveller landed on an unknown shore, ignorant of the local scale of values. She took no interest in the good-looking squire,

decidedly the most important person there ; she passed by the curate and the young lawyer with complete indifference, but she expressed a wish to make Mr. Brydon's acquaintance, and the next moment she was rustling softly over the grass with Mr. Eddington in attendance. Brydon saw them coming, and felt a shock of surprise and alarm. What the deuce did Eddington mean by it—couldn't he mind his own business, and leave other people alone? But he had not presence of mind enough to attempt an escape, and he stood, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other, till he was captured, and duly presented to Miss Hillier.

The worst of it was that her progress across the lawn had attracted attention. The boys, standing strictly on the defensive behind a convenient tree, silently conveyed to one another that she was a guy. Their sisters looked after her with curiously mingled feelings of disapproval and envy. Their own freshly-made costumes somehow seemed too new, and too neatly put on, by the side of those faintly-coloured folds which twisted and trailed and clung about the Kensington young lady. It was true that the draperies and soft laces which composed a harmony in yellows were slightly tumbled and dingy. One felt that they had been worn in a smoke-laden atmosphere, and crushed in crowded little drawing-rooms. But, nevertheless, there was an air of indefinable superiority about Miss Hillier's dress, a careless completeness of detail, to the yellow beads at her throat, and the cluster of yellow roses, which seemed half-ready to fall, so loosely were they fastened.

Two sisters stood watching her, and the younger, a pert schoolgirl, spoke under her breath.

"You don't call *her* pretty, I *hope*—a limp, affected thing! And I *do* think when people go to parties they might be *clean*! I should like to send that dress to the wash—looks as if she had slept in it."

"Yes," said the elder with a doubtful smile, "perhaps it does. But she must have slept in beautiful attitudes."

Brydon, embarrassed by the introduction, looked sideways and down, while Miss Hillier smiled languidly. "I've been hearing incredible things about you, Mr. Brydon."

He was obliged to answer. "I—I wouldn't believe them," he said.

"I shall be delighted to believe exactly the contrary on your assurance."

He looked round despairingly, but Eddington was gone. "I really don't know what I'm expected to say," he replied. "I don't know what the incredible things are."

"Tell me that you don't want to desecrate this sweet old-fashioned place by building cheap houses all over it!" Miss Hillier shuddered as she spoke. "There are so many cheap houses in the world, and so few old gardens. Mr. Brydon, you couldn't really be such a vandal! Not really!"

"I don't know who has been talking about that."

"Everybody! We are all talking about you—all watching you. Nobody knows what dreadful things you may be plotting. You haven't the evil eye, I hope? You won't blight the trees and flowers with a glance?"

"Do you believe in the evil eye?" he asked.

"Why not? I think you are dangerous. I wish I had brought an amulet. But we are on our guard, Mr. Brydon. Do not attempt to take Miss Wynne into a corner, and mesmerise her into signing away her property. I assure you we won't allow it."

"What will you do?" he said, and, half-smiling, he looked at her.

Miss Hillier's thoughts flashed from the question to Brydon's eyes. They were his only beauty, for he was

not a handsome man. He was slightly below the average height, he had a sallow skin, very ordinary features, and a thin moustache that scarcely shaded his upper lip. But for his eyes he would have been insignificant. They however were full of expression, and their depths of transparent gray were deepened and darkened by the black lashes that bordered them. "Eyes like agates," Miss Hillier said afterwards, "really too beautiful for a man of business."

"What would we do?" she repeated after a momentary pause. "Well, really, I hardly know. Part you by main force, I suppose."

"But anyhow Miss Wynne and I must settle it at last, you know?"

She made a little affirmative sign. "Yes, and I tremble for the result. It is always the same. When it comes to be a question between mean little houses and a dear old garden, the garden goes, swallowed up in hateful bricks and mortar. If I had any influence with Miss Wynne——"

"I hope to heaven you haven't!" Brydon ejaculated anxiously.

"I would entreat her to be firm. She has made one mistake already."

"What is that?"

"She should never have admitted you within the gates of her stronghold. I saw you looking round as if you were taking possession. If I were Miss Wynne, Mr. Brydon, I should shut myself up, and refuse to communicate with you."

"Wouldn't you even answer a letter?"

"No!" said Miss Hillier sternly. "I would not. I would run no risks. If an answer were absolutely necessary, I would send a little message by that nice, talkative Mr. Eddington. But I would not write, and as for an interview—never!"

Brydon was flattered, and laughed. It had displeased him that his cherished scheme should be made the subject of jesting talk, but a shy man naturally likes to be told that a woman finds him formidable.

"I don't know how I should manage—I'm afraid you would be too clever for me," he said. "I should have to try and make my way in in disguise."

"What, as the milk or the washing, or to look at the gas-meter? But seriously, Mr. Brydon, do you really mean that you would have the heart to destroy all this?"

He looked round deliberately and calmly. He had forgotten his shyness in the interest of the question. His glance took in all, the house half-buried in roses, vine and passion-flower, the fine turf of the lawn, the masses of leafage—syringa, myrtle, lilac, laurestinus and bay, the sweet old-fashioned flowers, the bushes of lavender and rosemary, the great trees, limes with their innumerable bees, poplars quivering lightly in the sun, tulip, juniper, chestnut, mulberry, medlar, and, close by where he stood, two great cedars, sweeping low with dusky horizontal boughs. Against their soft dimness Miss Hillier's slender, yellow-draped figure, fair dishevelled hair and refined face, came out like a picture, a little faded and pale, yet with a certain charm. Brydon's travelling glance ended by meeting the eyes that watched him, eyes tired and circled with faint shadows, yet intense with questioning interest.

"Well," he said slowly, "I'm very glad you should enjoy this to-day. It is very pretty, prettier than I thought. I don't at all want to spoil it now, but I should like to see the ground clear this autumn, ready to begin work the first thing in the spring."

"Never another spring for all this?" Miss Hillier demanded tragically, indicating the surroundings with a

movement of hand and wrist in a wrinkled, tan-coloured glove.

"I'm very sorry," the young man replied. "But if the cheap houses are urgently needed——"

"Oh, that sounds like a prospectus! If you mean it as a speculation, Mr. Brydon, I daresay it may be a good one—I'm not questioning that."

"A speculation——" he began, but instantly checked himself. "Well, I should like it to pay," he said, "but one gives a fancy price for a bit of ground like this. There's no chance of making a fortune out of it—worse luck! Still, I hope it will pay—I haven't much opinion of things that don't."

"I would rather not have the money you get for this. desecration!"

"It won't be much."

"You will do it for a little?"

"Yes. If you could see the cottages beyond that wall!"

"So very bad?" in a voice of languid softness.

"So hopelessly bad and overcrowded. I wish Miss Wynne would have that gate set open into the lane! Is the key in it, I wonder? Come and see."

She drew back. "No, no! There's a time for everything, Mr. Brydon. Not now."

"Yes, the time for that kind of thing mostly is 'not now.' I ought to have known. Well, you must take my word for it that if you saw those cottages you would wish me success in my speculation."

"Indeed I should do nothing of the kind. Can't you put your cottages somewhere else?"

"There is nowhere else. See how we are built in."

"And for that very reason I would fight to the last for this bit—the only remnant of sweetness and beauty left to you. Did you ever think what a source of health and joy

an old garden is among these crowded alleys? And how full of poetry! Paradise within a stone's throw of the squalid ugliness of a town like this!"

"Can't look into Paradise, you know," said Brydon.

"What then? Is the knowledge of hidden beauty nothing? It seems to me that one might breathe the flower-scented air"—the young man's lips twitched in a curious little spasm—"and dream by the wall which conceals and yet suggests it—dreams more precious than the dull realities of life. Why, all one's ideals would be there!"

(Brydon privately wondered what Miss Hillier's ideals would be if she had been brought up in Garden Lane instead of Kensington. While he was thinking about it, however, he found that she had gone on, and he was compelled to follow.)

"Think for one moment what half a dozen old gardens—not enclosures in the middle of squares of stucco-fronted houses—and not old graveyards laid out with shrubs and tablets, but real old gardens—gardens that people had loved and gardened in, gardens with memories, would be in London now! Don't their very names haunt you? Don't you feel a pang of regret when you drive by them in a cab?—those ghosts of gardens, forgotten long ago but for their names painted up at the corners of dirty unwholesome little streets! I daresay they said houses were urgently needed—but it is the old garden that is needed now!"

Brydon was certain that Miss Hillier was talking nonsense, but he wished she wouldn't, for the nonsense perplexed him. Did women argue like that about a simple matter of business? If so, Eddington might do the talking, for he'd be hanged if he would, and he stood with downcast eyes, twisting his straggling little moustache, and looking perfectly insignificant.

"I suppose that is what you will do," said Miss Hillier.

"You will cut down these trees, make the place hideously bare, and call it 'The Cedars'?"

"Let me only build my houses and you may call them what you like."

She laughed a little. "Take care! Well, I suppose you will get your own way. Perhaps you will live to regret it."

"If you would only go and—and *smell* those cottages—only once!" said the young man, growing desperate. "You wouldn't doubt then that I ought to have my own way in this!"

"Not if they were absolute pigsties!"

"They are."

"Then make them better if you can. But never sacrifice the priceless inheritance of the future to the comfort of a passing generation."

Brydon was dumb, silenced, not by the argument—he had not had time to consider it—but by the turn of the sentence. He could not be expected to talk like that.

"You are not to be moved—you have no pity on all this loveliness?" Miss Hillier continued after a pause. "Does not the very rustling of the leaves plead for mercy? Listen—listen!"

This was obviously poetry and nonsense, and Brydon broke roughly through the faint whispers far overhead. "I keep my pity for those who can feel."

"And do you think that trees and flowers cannot feel? But they do—I am sure they do," she said, gazing at him with mournful intensity. "Ah, how I wish that I could be the guardian of a spot like this! What a sweet atmosphere of gratitude to live in!" Here she seemed to wave a little towards an approaching figure. "I was just envying you, Miss Wynne."

("Here's another of them!" said Brydon to himself.)



"Envy—me?" Mary Wynne repeated, with a little questioning pause between the words.

"Yes—envying you your power to resist Mr. Brydon. I can only tell him how I would resist him if the ground were mine."

Brydon, in his talk with the lawyer, had called Miss Wynne a fine lady, and certainly she was finely dressed that afternoon. But as Miss Hillier spoke she suddenly looked at him with eyes timid as a child's, a liquid, shy, appealing glance. However fine she might be, she was very unlike the young lady from Philborough Terrace.

"It's a pretty garden, isn't it?" was her offer of an original contribution to the conversation. "You have been here before?"

"Never," said Brydon laconically.

Miss Hillier looked questioningly from one to the other, as if measuring their respective force and calculating chances.

"Never?" Miss Wynne exclaimed. "Oh, then you don't know how pretty it is! I mean that the plants and things only look to you what they are at this minute——"

"Pretty enough," he said.

"Yes. But if you had seen them all budding and blossoming! That great old thorn over there—it looks just like any other thorn, but it's a double one. I suppose it isn't right to like double flowers," she said, half-glancing at the pensive yellow-draped bystander, who smiled.

"Like what you like—I do." Brydon threw this in defiantly.

"Well, just for once," Miss Wynne continued. "I don't want all the hawthorns like it, but it was very pretty this spring. It was covered with blossoms like the tiniest, tiniest roses, white, you know, almost greenish white—you might have made nosegays of them for fairies as tall as your finger."

"Pretty," said the young mill-owner again. "I'm sure I don't want to depreciate your garden, Miss Wynne. Those are not my tactics."

There was a soft rustling of trailing folds on the fine dry grass while he spoke. The principals in the coming contest were left for the moment face to face and alone.

### III

#### A TRUCE .

THERE was a brief silence. Then Miss Wynne said, "Wouldn't you like just to walk round and look at the place?"

He assented, and the pair moved slowly, side by side, along a mossy gravel path. Eddington, where he stood on the lawn, followed them with his eyes, and smiled. "They had better fight it out," said Miss Hillier, sweeping softly towards him.

"So I think," the old gentleman replied.

"I have done my best," she continued.

"On which side?"

"Can you ask? My best to persuade Mr. Brydon to relinquish this wicked scheme of his."

"Ah—I see—your worst for my client. No matter, Brydon is as obstinate as—as fifty mules."

"So I haven't done any harm?" said Miss Hillier, smiling good-humouredly.

"Not a bit," said Eddington, "and I don't suppose I have done any good."

"You really take that vandal's part? You can't!"

"Miss Wynne will never get such another offer. If the garden were yours I should certainly advise you to accept it. You would—wouldn't you?"

"Never! How can you think it?"

"You wouldn't?" said Eddington. "I'm delighted to hear it. You would give up all the world—give up Kensington, to settle down among us all and take care of these cedars!"

The sun was shining on the great shadowy trees and on the transitory, faintly-tinted little figure on the grass below. It was strange to think that those dusky giants were so sorely in need of protection.

Meanwhile the arbiters of their fate had paused in their walk, and were looking up, where beyond a screen of blossoming limes rose the high, unbroken wall of a large building. From behind it came a measured sound, dull yet distinct, like the heavy throbbing of great pulses. Brydon's looms were at work.

"It seems strange," said Miss Wynne, facing the eyeless surface, "that you should be so near, and yet never have come into the garden till to-day."

"I don't see it. My place is on the other side of the wall."

"But that's what I mean. A wall seems such a little thing to part two places so completely."

"Does it?" said Brydon shortly. "I fancy it's mostly like that. Only children cry for the moon—for things obviously out of reach. We older and wiser folk waste our lives on the wrong side of the thinnest possible partition."

"It would be something, though," said Mary Wynne in a meditative voice, "to be sure that—that it was only on the other side of a thin partition."

"It," he repeated, and his isolation of the word gave it an emphasis which sent a faint flush to his companion's cheek. "'It' is the ideal, I suppose. Well, I don't know where yours may be——"

"I'm sure I can't tell you—I don't know that I've got one. But I know where yours is."

"Well, I suppose you do."

She faced him suddenly with a beseeching glance. "Oh, Mr. Brydon, is it any good telling you how *sorry* I am that I can't break down your wall for you?"

"It's very kind of you to say so."

"Don't!" she entreated.

"Well, if you can't, you know," said Brydon, "why—you can't."

"But it isn't like that—I can't, and yet of course I *could*."

"Oh yes, under some other circumstances. Well, I don't see why you should worry yourself about it. You have a perfect right to say 'won't'—why not end the matter so?"

"Have I a right to say I won't? Do you think I have?"

"A legal right, anyhow."

She moved slowly onward. He kept near her in a hesitating fashion, through the flickering leaf-shadows which dappled the light folds of her gown. She walked languidly, droopingly, as if she were burdened. They were close to the southern wall of her domain, and her eyes strayed to a small entrance overhung with clematis and honeysuckle, and approached through a little arch, about which a climbing rose was delicately tangled. Brydon swerved towards it and she stood still. The key was in the lock, he turned it, opened the door, and she saw an oblong picture of Garden Lane in a frame of flower and leaf.

A dirty child started up from the threshold, dragging a dirty baby. The baby, which had but just learned to walk, was swung off its rickety little legs, and fell on its face into the hot dust of the roadway, where already lay an old boot, a dead kitten, some shreds of paper, and a battered tin. Being dragged up and shaken it looked little the worse, and hardly any dirtier. Its guardian sister, clutching it

absent-mindedly, halted at a little distance, where she showed a face of a common type, and a sore eye, partially obscured by a filthy strip of rag. The other eye, dilating with wonder, stared past Miss Wynne at the distant figures of the gentlefolks, seen, lightly active in the sunlit greenness of the garden, intent upon a flying ball. A girl cried out—a lad, all white arms and legs, sprang to strike.

Brydon closed the door and locked it.

Miss Wynne's gaze passed from the doorway to Brydon's face. "I thought you were going out," she said, as he approached, swinging the key on his finger.

"Oh no!" he answered. "I only wanted to look at my side of the wall for a moment. No, I wasn't going to beat a retreat like that."

"Why did you shut the gate so quickly? Did you see that poor child? How she stared!"

"Naturally," said Brydon. "But I didn't know you would enjoy being stared at."

"It seemed so cruel to shut her out. Oh, how cruel I am!"

Her companion said nothing.

"How I wish there was some other ground that you could take, Mr. Brydon! Something that would do for your cottages. *Isn't* there? Are you sure?"

Brydon turned his dark-lashed eyes full upon her, and bit his lip. The maddening, innocent folly of the question took his breath away for a moment, and when he recovered it his self-control came too. It was fortunate, for he had never felt so great a need of an oath, something brief, sudden, brutal, like a discharge of dynamite. To ask a man who had been brooding over his scheme, night and day, for months, whether by any chance he had ever thought of it at all—it was too much! First he longed to

swear, then he would have liked to laugh, but he only said quietly, "If there had been, my cottages would be built."

She answered with a sigh. "Of course they would. It was foolish to ask, I suppose; but I wished so much that there might be!"

"I'm sorry too," said the young man. "But if you were to look at a plan, you'd see in a minute. There's the Baptist chapel runs right into me on the other side, and the corner bit is the public-house—'Hand and Flower,' don't you know? Here's the road," and he began to trace imaginary lines with the key on the palm of his hand. "Then there's Burgoyne's brewery at the back of me—you can see a bit of the roof over there," nodding towards it. "Well, of course, I could build some cottages somewhere else—on the nearest bit I could get, though I doubt it wouldn't be very near, this neighbourhood is so crowded. Still it might be better than nothing. But it isn't only the cottages, it's the mill. I want to enlarge it, to improve it. It isn't well built—there isn't room enough in it—it isn't properly ventilated. In a word, it's old-fashioned. I'm sure it isn't wholesome; I do what I can, but nothing can be done worth doing without more space."

Brydon had made what was, for him, a remarkably long speech, and his tone throughout had been patiently explanatory and even gentle. That brief gust of irritation had passed and left no trace. Miss Wynne was perplexing, but he *did* believe her to be sincere, and sincerity atoned for much. He wished he hadn't to deal with a woman—women were not practical, but that was not Miss Wynne's fault. He recognised her claim to elaborate explanations and a certain amount of humouring. Business, in a case like this, must be polite, must wear light gloves and a flower in its button-hole.

And at any rate Miss Wynne had listened to him. She

had noted every syllable that fell from his lips, and when he paused she looked almost too serious. The young man felt that the time was ill-chosen, that he had said too much. A face like that, with dejection and appeal in every delicate line, was not fit wear for a tennis party. "I forgot," he exclaimed with a short uneasy laugh, "Eddington said I wasn't to try to drive a bargain to-day."

"Do you always do what Mr. Eddington tells you?"

"No. He's not my adviser, you see."

"He's very much on your side, Mr. Brydon. I should think you might say what you pleased, he talks enough himself. He tells me I shall never have such another offer for the garden."

"I doubt if you will."

"No—it's splendid—it's munificent, I'm dazzled when I think of it! Only what I wanted was not to have any offer at all! As it is, my greatest comfort is that I'm refusing a small fortune—I'm not seeking my own profit, no one can say that!"

"I'm glad you think so much of my offer," said the young man, "for I can't make it any bigger. Such as it is, it's my last word—I can't do anything more in the dazzling line."

"I don't *want* any more. I'd rather not."

"Oh well, that's all right. I fancy it takes a woman to feel like that. Most of us would always rather have some more—I would, I know."

"I don't want to make a profit out of it. You are offering me too much already."

"Well, I'll beat you down if you'll give me a chance," said Brydon; "but I can't go any higher. Sooner than that I'd move the whole concern. I've had the offer of some land three miles off, at Holly Hill."

Her eyes lighted up with radiant hope, her face was



transfigured. "Oh, why don't you do that? I was out that way yesterday—it was lovely! Such open breezy slopes, such gorse, such a wide clear sky! Mr. Brydon, it would be *life* to your poor people. Oh, how happy I should be! Fancy that wretched little girl out in the fresh air at Holly Hill—and the baby—it would be ten times better—a thousand times better than anything you could do here. Oh, why don't you do it? It would be perfect. Out in the open, away from all these crowding roofs and houses—*do* it, Mr. Brydon! Oh, you must!"

She seemed to rise with the eager rapture of her voice. He stared, he listened with parted lips, and then with his answer they both came down to earth again.

"Several things against it, Miss Wynne. It would be an experiment, and a hazardous one. You don't know how these poor people cling to the neighbourhood they have known. I suspect a good many would stay on here and starve, sooner than go to Holly Hill. It would break up families too—there are girls working for me, and their brothers have got places as errand boys and the like in the town. And they would be a couple of miles from church or school. That isn't all, either. It would require a greater outlay than I could manage at present; it might be the best in the end, but I should have to wait—years. I have my mother to think of, she lives at Brighton, she depends on me; I can run risks for myself, but not for her. I can't tell how long it might be before I should dare to move in the matter, and all that time these miserable children would be growing up—crowds of 'em—in their filth and wretchedness. Why, I might die first! Oh no! I've thought it all out; I only told you that you might understand why I set that limit to the price I was prepared to offer; if you asked more Holly Hill would be better."

He had effectually quenched the brightness of her glance.

"I should never ask *more*! I have told you already, it is too much."

"I know. But your friends——"

"I have none."

"Only yourself to consider in the matter, then?"

"I suppose so." The swift colour flew to her cheek.

"Yes, only myself."

"So much the better," said Brydon absently. She looked at him quickly and questioningly, and brought back his wandering thoughts. He evidently felt that he must explain himself. "It narrows the discussion, don't you know?—brings it within manageable limits." Then he considered for a moment. "I don't mean that *you* are manageable, Miss Wynne," he concluded, and having explained away his explanation, was silent.

"I think I ought to go back," Miss Wynne replied. "Don't you play tennis?"

He shook his head. "I've kept you too long. And I've been talking business again!"

"I don't know why you shouldn't."

"It seems as if I couldn't talk anything else."

"Well, that's what is expected of you," said Miss Wynne. "Everybody was sure you would talk about your cottages. They wouldn't interrupt, they are all so interested."

Brydon looked sideways at the tennis players, drawing down his brows. "I'm not expected to talk about anything else—well, it's satisfactory to know that. Am I supposed to have finished now, do you think? If so, as you say, we had better go back."

"No, stop a minute." She had caught the sense of his words, but not the displeased tone. Her face was quickening with a new thought. "Mr. Brydon, I have an idea! Why shouldn't you make some windows in your wall? Wouldn't that make it better for your people—a little

better, at any rate? Wouldn't it be brighter and more cheerful? Why don't you?"

"But I've no right," said Brydon.

"But if I say you may?"

"Nonsense—you are not going to say anything of the kind. How should you like to be overlooked by rows and rows of windows?"

She flinched a little, but reiterated her "You may if you like."

"But I don't like! I won't do it. Even if you never regretted it for yourself, you'll want to sell or let the place some day, and then you'd find out the inconvenience of it fast enough. You shouldn't say things like that without consulting Eddington."

"Indeed? I fancied I might say what I pleased."

"No," said the young man, "you'd keep your word. Well, it doesn't matter this time. It's very kind of you, Miss Wynne, but really it would do you much more harm than it would do me good. It's not so very noble of me to say 'No.' I don't care for half-and-half concessions." He looked her straight in the face, their eyes were about on a level—his were lucid and resolute. "All or nothing, Miss Wynne."

Hers dropped, escaping him. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but no sound came. "All—or—nothing," Brydon repeated.

She found her voice then, but it was hardly above a whisper. "I'm sorry—sorry, but it must be nothing. I can't help it."

"Don't say it like that!" he exclaimed. "I didn't mean to pain you. Look here, I'll tell you how it shall be. We'll leave it till the beginning of the year. You shan't be bothered any more, no one shall mention it to you, but my offer shall hold good till then; and if you change your

mind and like to say 'Yes,' you can, any minute. And if not—why, your silence shall be your final answer when the new year comes—it will do as well as anything else, and it will make it easy for you. Is it a bargain?"

She was grateful for the respite. "Yes," she said. They walked across the grass to the rest of the party, only pausing once while she gathered a bit of heliotrope, which seemed to require careful selection. Brydon fancied she was gaining time to recover her usual calmness. She offered him the flower with a smile.

While he was putting it in his coat he murmured something about thinking he must be off now.

"So soon?" said his hostess, as they came up to a group near the tennis players. Eddington turned round and looked at them.

"Oh, my prophetic soul!" Miss Hillier exclaimed, in a voice which seemed thinner and clearer than those about her, and struck a distinct note among them all. "The battle is over, and lost! Look at Mr. Brydon—he has begun to pick the flowers, and he has taken possession of the key."

All eyes converged on the young mill-owner, who looked down at the key which he was absently holding, and remembered that he had taken it out of the lock of the little gate. He crimsoned, like an angry, bashful boy, with vexation at the trivial blunder, and at the widening smile which encircled him. "It isn't so at all," he began, just as the white-flannelled young squire broke in with his easy laugh—

"Going to lock us all out and begin to cut down the trees, eh, Brydon? Like old Gladstone, eh? No time like the present, is there?"

Brydon fastened on the one point in the circle at which he could strike. "Nothing of the kind," he said, perversely

exulting in his own defeat, since it enabled him to contradict the smiling young man. "Miss Wynne has sent me about my business—haven't you, Miss Wynne?"

She blushed. "Oh, not like that!" she cried.

"But you have—and the proof of it is that I'm going, as I told you just now, didn't I? I can't think how I can have been so stupid as to bring the key away, but, if you'll allow me, I'll go out by that little door—it's nearer for me."

"Don't you let him take the key, Miss Wynne," said the young squire. "Don't you trust him. Give it to Miss Hillier—she'll see him out at the little door, and double lock it after him, won't you, Miss Hillier?"

"Do I look like a turnkey?" said that young lady languidly. "Really, Mr. Haldane, I wasn't brought up to the profession. And I'm sure Mr. Brydon is an honourable enemy——"

"Oh, you're too trustful! Ladies always are."

"I wonder at it," Miss Hillier replied. "Are you really going, Mr. Brydon? Good-bye, then, and you'll let me wish you all success in cottage-building—somewhere else!"

"Thank you," said Brydon.

"You'll be sure to find some other place for your little cheap houses—won't he, Miss Wynne, if he only looks? Oh, I don't mean to be rude to them—they'll be charming little houses, I daresay, and I shall be quite interested in hearing about them now I know they are not to be here. There *must* be plenty of room; without spoiling this sweet old place. Good-bye."

Brydon listened, looking straight at her with an air of dumb resignation. He shook hands with Miss Wynne, then turned to Eddington. "I'll walk to the gate with you," said the old lawyer, and the pair went off together, taking the most direct way to the little door, by a great clump of Portugal laurel, quivering and shining in the

sun. Eddington walked in his erect, old-gentlemanly fashion, but Brydon slouched carelessly and moodily, and seemed to swerve a little from his companion as they went, with their shadows falling far across the shaven turf.

He hurried out of the garden, never turning his head, and consequently was unaware of the curiously intent gaze with which Miss Wynne followed him. In fact it was lost on every one but Miss Hillier, who was thinking that her young hostess would make a charming picture. She went further, and thought of a young artist friend at Kensington who would be the very man to paint it. "Just the kind of thing to suit him, I *wish* he were here! Against a bit of that old, mellow brick wall—how well she would come out! And the sentiment of the thing, too—exactly what he would enjoy—it's a thousand pities he isn't here. *A Guardian Genius*—oh, I see it all! A line or two of description to explain it, and it's just what the public would understand and like. He might do something with the idea, perhaps, but that's not like seeing the real thing. Only, isn't the guardian genius a little too sad? Can she be repenting as she looks after Mr. Brydon? No doubt it would be a fine thing to sell her house and grounds for about double what she gave for them—one could do so much with the money—and yet I didn't think she was that kind of girl. But this certainly does look like repentance."

Acting on this suspicion, Miss Hillier went up to her hostess with warm congratulations. "I am so glad—so very glad," she said. "It would have been desecration. I'm so glad you felt it so too—so thankful it was in your hands."

"I don't know," said Miss Wynne vaguely. The gate opened into Garden Lane and a figure vanished through it. Eddington came strolling back alone, looking at the flower beds.

Miss Hillier could not repress an exclamation. "What a relief! He is gone."

"Yes. I only hope it is right. - You think it is, don't you?"

"Right?" cried Miss Hillier rapturously. "Your defence of the garden? Right! It is much more than right—it is Noble—it is Perfectly Beautiful!"

"I should like to know that it was right, too," said Miss Wynnie simply.

"But it *is* right—it *must* be! There can be no doubt of it!" The other turned her gentle eyes on the Kensington young lady's face. "I hope so," she said.

The old lawyer came up and the talk ended, but Miss Hillier thought it over, and as she drove away with her friends through the midsummer evening she leaned forward and spoke impressively. "Jessie, mind you write and tell me about the garden, when it is all settled, you know."

Jessie's brother, one of the tennis playing youths, spoke up instantly. "Oh, but that's all over—didn't you hear? He's not going to have it—she won't sell. I would—I'd stand out for the very last farthing, but then I would. I wouldn't be fool enough to lose a chance like that!"

"Wouldn't you, Owen?" said the thin superior voice. "Well, I don't think Miss Wynne will be fool enough either. I fancy Mr. Brydon will get what he wants—soon. What a lovely moon!"

"Do you really?" Jessie exclaimed. "I thought she was quite determined. What makes you think that?"

"I don't know, but I do think it. Only write to me when she sells it—I should like to know." The carriage rolled smoothly on between the hedgerows, and Miss Hillier sat thinking. "It's not the money," she said to herself, "it's a case of conscience, but that's just as fatal. He'll surely get in." She seemed to see Miss Wynne's conscience

working silently, inexorably, as waters work in the dead of night, filtering through tiny unseen channels, widening their narrow ways, sapping the heavy dyke, flowing, streaming, rushing with resistless force, till daylight comes, defences fall and all lies open. "A guardian genius has no *business* to have a conscience!" thought Miss Hillier, "though to be sure the idea for a picture is just as good. I really must tell Mr. Wargrave. Only, if she feels like that, why doesn't she let Mr. Brydon have his cottages at once?"



## IV

### WHY NOT?

WHY does she not let Mr. Brydon have his cottages at once? It was the very question the young man asked himself as he sat that evening in his little room at the factory. As he bent over his desk, propping his forehead on one hand while with the other he pencilled figures on a loose sheet of paper, he looked like the incarnation of intense research, though he was really musing as idly as Miss Hillier herself. Why would not Miss Wynne part with her garden?

Her distress had been evident. A memory of her gentle dejected face floated between his eyes and the paper, so faint that he went on scribbling his figures right through it, and yet it seemed somehow to cling to him. Never once had she attempted to explain her refusal. "Oh, how cruel I am!" she had said, as she looked out at the poor little wretch in the lane, and Brydon believed in the sincerity of the cry. But she had not uttered a word to justify, or even to extenuate her cruelty. She had spoken as if it were inevitable—"It must be; I can't help it"—while expressly avowing that there was nothing below the surface which was a legal hindrance to the sale. "I can't," she had said, "and yet of course I *could*." He put all these speeches of hers together in his mind and considered them. "I

wonder what her reason is, for she must have a reason. I know she has, because she won't give me any. If she hadn't one she would have invented half a dozen."

He looked at the paper on which he had been scribbling. He had absently written down the sum which he proposed to give Miss Wynne, and then had multiplied it, and multiplied that again till it swelled to a fabulous amount. "And I suppose she'd tell me that *that* wouldn't buy it!" he said to himself. "Should I believe her?"

He turned sideways to his table, flung his legs over the arm of his chair, and proceeded to light his pipe. The window of his room looked into Garden Lane. The blind was drawn down but the sash was raised for air, and a man staggered along in the roadway below, howling a song. "Hezekiah Barnes, if I'm not mistaken, home from the 'Hand and Flower.'" The discordant yell was suddenly interrupted by a torrent of shrill abuse. "Just so," said Brydon, half-aloud. "Betsy Barnes it is. There's no mistaking *her*! Ah, he's going in—head foremost I should think. And now I suppose Hezekiah junior, and Ada, and Minnie, and Fred, and the little ones, are all waking up to have their minds improved, and perhaps to join in the fray. Well, *I* can't help it."

He smoked on, staring fixedly at the wall. It was coarsely papered with a representation of large blocks of granite. The paper was discoloured and torn in one corner where the damp had come in, and the contrast between its shabby flimsiness and the stately solidity which it mocked was grotesque. The flaring gas had blackened the ceiling and grimed the whole room. Thomas Brydon gazed at his granite, got up, laid his hand upon it, leant his shoulder against it. He had never taken much heed of it before; he had left the dirty little office as he found it when he became master. It had been good enough for

his uncle, it was good enough for him. And the wall had been the boundary of his dominion. But now he felt it merely an obstacle; he braced himself as if he would have conquered it by sheer might of muscle, as if he would have thrust himself through, where, at arm's length—he had never realised before how literally the object of his desire was at arm's length—the full moon was shining on the blossoming limes. The slender boughs were swaying softly in the fresh night air, which smelt of their sweetness; they touched the brickwork with light leaf sprays and delicate moving shadows, while on the other side he faced his torn and faded wall-paper, and felt himself as hopelessly shut out as by squared blocks of adamant. "*What* is there in the garden that she can't part with?" he mused. "It isn't as if she had known it long. By Jove, it's like the old rhyme—

" 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary,  
What does your garden grow?'"

The conceit pleased him, and in a whimsical way seemed to put him on better terms with his neighbour. Henceforth she was something more than "Miss Wynne" to him, she was the "Mary, Mary," whose "contrariness" was an acknowledged fact since the days of his childhood. Evidently she was only fulfilling her destiny.

She sat alone that night on the cushioned window-seat of her parlour, wrapped in a soft white shawl, and resting her arm on the sill. Behind her the lamp burned steadily, a yellow globe, and the little moths came hurrying in from the shadows of the trees.

The garden was blossoming for her with all its memories, but after all how few and small they were! She had been about half a year with the Macleans, and out of those six months there had been nearly three weeks of sweet remem-

brance. Eighteen days—no more—during which Philip had idled about those mossy walks, reading, smoking, dreaming, and sometimes, with a finger in his book, studying the glimpses of blue through the sweeping cedar boughs, or the little plants that grew in the crevices of the buttressed wall. Not so much as eighteen hours—not eighteen half-hours out of those days, in which Philip had talked, in his gentle, rather melancholy fashion—generally choosing the most interesting of all subjects—himself. Mary had never listened to a young man's confidences before, and she accepted them as an appeal, a trust reposed in her which claimed her gratitude and loyalty. His hopes, his fears, his plans, his wrongs, as he let them fall from his half-smiling lips, were gathered into a tender little heart and cherished there. She remembered the very spot where he stood, looking round, and said that he should never forget the place. "I shall think of it wherever I may go. I should like to come back years hence, perhaps, and find it just the same, only mellowed and ripened with the sun of a few more seasons—the passion-flower grown higher about the study window, the wistaria a little farther along the west wall, just enough to show it had been living while I was gone. It is the sweetest old garden I ever saw. It is like a convent garden. I feel as if there were something sacred about it. I like the roofs and houses all round, and this one spot, sheltered and green and blossoming. I shall dream of it when I am—heaven knows where I shall be! Perhaps in some suburban street with half a dozen geraniums on the window sill. More likely in some big dreary new country, which is only proud of its so many square miles, and hasn't such a thing as an old wall. The flowers will all be new acquaintances there—how homesick I shall be! How I shall dream of the sweet-smelling bushes here—myrtle, and bay, and rosemary, and lavender! I think I

should like to be buried here when I die—laid in the soft black earth, to come up in spring in homely old-fashioned flowers. Would you set sweet basil over me, I wonder? But I want to come back here alive first, just to feel the quiet sunny welcome of the place, to smell the earth and leaves and flowers, and hear the bees. What nonsense all this is! I daresay the garden will be sold and spoilt long before I come back to it!" •

"Oh, if I could save it for you!" thought Mary, and ached with an impotent longing to give him his fancy.

He had gone away soon afterwards, leaving the memory of words and glances, which might mean all or nothing, and little more substantial except a list of books scribbled on the fly-leaf of an old letter, and an outline, on a page torn from his little sketch-book, of the house where his earliest childhood had been spent. "The old fir-tree was just here," he had said, explaining some boyish exploit, and had dented in its scarred and writhen stem and broken boughs with a few vigorous pencil strokes.

Mary was the possessor of these treasures, both literary and artistic, and also of some information concerning Philip's career. She knew that his father and mother were both dead, and that an uncle of his mother's had brought him up in a kindly, slovenly fashion, permitting him to do very much as he pleased, and rather ignoring than sanctioning his desire to be an artist. The old gentleman hated scenes, and arguments, and decisions, and let matters drift, from unwillingness to act. Of late, however, matters had not been going so smoothly. Mr. Frere had put some money into a mine which appeared to be of extraordinary depth. Nothing came out of it, and nobody could get to the bottom of the thing. "Perhaps it hasn't any bottom to it," said Philip, idly crushing the leaves of the walnut-tree under which he stood. "How sweet these leaves are!

Anyhow he has dropped his money out of reach, and he is out of temper with me in consequence. He knows very well that I'm guiltless of silver-mining, but he must find fault with some one, so he says I ought to get to work. And it appears that what I call work he calls idling. Well, it is *not* very remunerative at present, and perhaps the old boy can't manage to keep me at it. We had almost a quarrel—more shame for me, for he's a good old fellow!—and then it was settled that I should come here for a bit, to these cousins of his, while he went to town—I suppose to try to look into this blessed mine a little. *Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galère?* So here am I stranded. I've an elder brother in New Zealand who wants me to go out there. I suppose he thinks he should enjoy my society, or perhaps he fancies I should be ornamental, for I'm sure I shouldn't be the least good to him. He'd be horribly disappointed if I did go out; he hasn't seen me since I was ten or eleven, when I was always at his heels, worshipping him because he could smoke, and knew a lot of card tricks, and had a gun. He used to encourage me in all sorts of mischief, and it seems to me he was always turning me upside down. I liked it immensely, you know, but how does it strike you as a basis for lifelong companionship? I have my doubts even as to my brother, and I'm certain I should loathe the life. Well, then, I've got an uncle, I forget where *he* is, it's out in America, I know—something beginning with a C. Could it be Colorado, I wonder? I suppose he'd want me to help kill beetles. Why couldn't my relations settle in some decent kind of place? An uncle in Italy, now, one might be glad of an uncle in Italy, but what can one do with one in Colorado or Chicago, or wherever it is?" Philip fairly groaned in his despair. "Well, I shall be there or in New Zealand before the year is out—there's no help for it!"

A day or two later he had received a rather enigmatical letter from old Mr. Frere which brought his visit to a close. Mary remembered that morning, her hand had not forgotten his clasp, she could recall his good-bye, his backward glance, his lifted hat. Old Teddy Maclean smiled at his going as he had smiled at his coming, and Miss Mary Anne put on a dingier cap, and said she had never been so late finishing the spring cleaning, and they would wash the china in the drawing-room that very afternoon. Nothing more was said about their late visitor, till one morning old Teddy came down to breakfast chuckling over the discovery that Mr. Frere had made use of them to keep the young fellow out of the way while he went to London to get married. The losses through the silver mine had been exaggerated, they had served as a convenient pretext for urging Philip to betake himself to New Zealand or America. The new Mrs. Frere was a widow with a limited income—"been after Frere for years," said Maclean.

"He's an old fool," said Miss Mary Anne, peering into the teapot.

"Well, Master Philip must turn out now," said Teddy. "The happy pair won't want him hanging about the place."

"And a good thing too! The *folly* of taking a lad like that to bring up! I told Robert Frere my opinion of it years ago. 'You should have left him to his own people,' I said. 'Nobody but a born idiot would have saddled himself with the boy.' He hadn't a word to answer back; he stood smiling and looking just as silly as he always did. But now I'll be bound he's sorry enough he didn't ask my advice before he took him in."

"Well, perhaps," old Maclean replied. "But after all the young fellow has been company for him, company, you know."

"Company! That's all you think of—company! I'm

not so fond of it, and if I do want company I like people who can pay their way. If not, they ought to make themselves useful—that's *my* opinion—and be glad to do it. I've no patience with your Philip, dawdling round the place with a pipe and a paint box——"

"It was a cigarette mostly," said Teddy.

"Well, that's worse. More expensive, and people who can't pay for what they want shouldn't *be* expensive. He'll have to come to his senses now. Company, indeed! I thought him very poor company. If you've done your breakfast, Mary, you might as well run up and get out those curtains ready for me to look over as soon as I've spoken to cook."

That was the last that Mary heard of Philip. She watched for his name, but it was never mentioned; she made herself a willing slave to Miss Mary Anne in the hope of staying on in the old house where he might some day return, but it was all in vain. The old lady never kept a companion for more than half a year. She thought them moderately satisfactory for two months, she endured them for two more, and then quarrelled with them till they left. Poor Mary's time came, she was driven out of the garden, and thenceforward there was no chance of further tidings, only a blackness and silence which seemed to grow a shade heavier when some one said that old Teddy was dead, and that his sister had gone home to Norfolk.

Yet it seemed to Mary that the hardest time to bear had been the few weeks between the day when she found herself mistress of what to her was considerable wealth, and the day when the purchase of the house and garden was completed. She had been forced to hide her feelings, Philip had never said or done anything which would entitle her to avow them. With a woman's submission to the laws of propriety she had smiled, and appeared indifferent, and



acquiesced in the lawyer's delays, though all the while her heart was throbbing in terror lest some one else should arrive upon the scene determined to buy the property. She could not sleep at night; she nearly fell ill from sheer anxiety. Why—why did Mr. Eddington make such a fuss about title and price, when every moment was a hideous risk? She sat looking at him while he explained the progress of the negotiations, but she could have danced with impatience and agony on the floor of his office. Some one else would step in and get the place—some man who could manage for himself—and she would be homeless all her life! “Yes, I see,” she said meekly, “of course you understand these matters and I don’t. It isn’t settled yet, then? No, of course not. Oh, I see, I’m sure it is quite right;” and she smiled and looked down, and clenched a little hidden hand, as if she would have driven her nails into the flesh. “Oh, you idiot—you idiot! Why don’t you pay and have done with it?”

And Eddington—poor soul—thought she was extremely well satisfied with his management of affairs, as indeed he was himself. He made a capital bargain for her. Old Brydon was content with his factory as it was, and young Thomas Brydon, who might perhaps have influenced him, was away somewhere in the north. The owner was anxious to sell, and nobody wanted the old house and garden except Miss Wynne. Luckily for her, nobody knew how much she wanted them, and Eddington, by his delays and his coolness, effected a considerable abatement in the price demanded.

Since a change of name had been the condition attached to her legacy, the garden seemed to Mary the one link between the present and the past. Mary Medland existed no longer, but Philip could find his way, if he would, to the bench under the acacia, where the milk-white blossoms

dropped on the shaven lawn. There, recovering from her terrible anxiety, she waited for him. Through every change of season, through every hour of the day, the old house was ready for his return. The world widened as she thought of him. Had he gone to New Zealand? to America? Was there not even a continent of which she might think certainly that it held Philip?

Rivers and mountains seemed to conspire against that innocent love. Desolate leagues of forest and plain, desolate leagues of heaving sea, haunted her imagination with maddening persistency as she lay awake in her bed. How was she ever to find him again—how was she even to think of him in those immense spaces? They were terrible from their loneliness, but there were times when she was heartsick with an oppressive consciousness of the swarming atoms of human life roaming aimlessly over the vast globe, as sparks quicken, and run, and die in tinder. So many hundreds, and thousands, and millions, and tens of millions of men, and among them—Philip. So many kindling and fading sparks, and among them the one wandering point of light which held all possibilities of brightness and warmth for her. On stormy nights the beating of the rain on her window pane told her with dreary iteration of the cold inhospitality of the heavens. The vagrant winds rushed by with wild half-human cries, as if they had caught the prayers and messages of countless parted souls, and were blending and rending them in cruel sport, and sweeping them away into the outer darkness of forgetfulness. And when morning came, after one of these troubled nights, the very sun was apt to show a mocking glance, as if he knew but would not tell, whether day after day he looked on Philip, or on Philip's grave.

Philip's grave! Mary was young enough to turn to that sad thought, and dwell upon it with passionate despair, but

too young to really believe in its possibility. Philip must come back, would come back, and would find her waiting. She read the books he had recommended, she tended the flowers he had noticed, she lived patiently within her walled garden. One day, it was a Tuesday and a working day, she noticed that the great pulses of the factory were still, and some one said that it was on account of Mr. Brydon's funeral. She remembered Mr. Brydon, a little shuffling, blinking, gray-haired man, who sat not far from her at church. Dead! She sauntered idly to and fro, looking up at the wall, blank and blind behind a tracery of leafless boughs. She was interested in death, but not in Mr. Brydon.

It was one of those days in February which are an earnest of spring, like the passing glimpse of a face beloved, quickening memory and hope. The borders were dotted with clusters of snowdrops, the ground was broken here and there where strong green leaves of daffodils were pushing upward, the winter violets had a purple bloom upon them, and in a sunny corner a mezereon held out its leafless flowering twigs. Mary paced the gravel path, drawing deep breaths of the soft air, and feeling the life of spring in her veins. It seemed to her afterwards that it was the last peaceful day she was ever to have there.

That one day the looms were still; and Thomas Brydon, in his suit of newest black, with crape on his hat, sat in the mourning-coach, stood by the grave's edge, with the slow clanging of the bell in his ears, and did the melancholy honours of a well-spread table at his suburban house. His insignificance and pallor were shadowed by the funeral blackness; he spoke little, but went through his duties with the utmost decorum, carving for his guests, taking wine with his uncle's old friends, and listening to their anecdotes of the dead man. The company dispersed,

unanimous on two points, that the sherry was good—old Brydon's sherry always was—and that the young fellow wasn't going to set the Thames on fire.

But the next morning he was at the factory in a shabby coat, with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, glancing here and there with brilliant eyes, and showing an unexpected familiarity with every detail of the business. Before the day was out he appeared in Eddington's office, inquiring whether Miss Wynne would be willing to sell her house and garden. He was prepared to offer her a liberal price.

Eddington communicated with his client, and wrote a negative answer. Miss Wynne did not wish to part with her property.

Brydon apparently acquiesced, but he began to make a stir in the town about the disgraceful condition of Garden Lane, and three courts that led out of it. Some six or seven cottages were his own property. These were, by no means the worst, take them altogether they were perhaps the best, and yet, as he honestly owned, they were bad enough. He wrote a letter to the local paper, pointing out the hideous overcrowding which was a shame to a civilised place. Miss Wynne read the letter, heard some of the talk that ensued, and felt her brick wall no better than the flimsiest veil between herself and the appalling indecency of the lane. She seemed to see through it, and felt sick with horror in the shadow of her cedars. Even when she lay down at night in the cool purity of her wide dim room, where rustling leaf sprays garlanded her windows, she could not sleep for thinking of those foul little dens to which fathers and brothers came stumbling from the public-houses. A breath of uncleanness tainted her very dreams.

And she could do nothing—she had not an inch of property beyond her garden wall. If only some one else would do something, and let her subscribe!

Brydon reappeared in Mr. Eddington's office. They had met pretty often in the interval, and the young man was more conversational. He spoke of the interest which had been excited by his letter to the *Brenthill Guardian*. "But it's very little good," he said. "Plenty of talk, but something must be done."

"Something ought to be done," Eddington admitted.

The mill-owner got up and stood on the rug. "Do you know what I've come for?" he said, looking down.

"Well, I can guess," Mr. Eddington replied.

"I must have that garden. I want to build some decent houses. I can't take 'No' for an answer."

The other smiled doubtfully.

"Look here!" Brydon exclaimed, sitting down on a corner of the office-table. "I'm going to tell you exactly how the matter stands."

He did so at length, and yet with an amazing directness and simplicity. When he had explained his position he named the precise sum he offered for the garden. "It is more than it is worth, but I am prepared to give it, under the circumstances. Infernally unlucky for me that Miss Wynne has got hold of it—pity the people who left her the money didn't live a little longer! But that can't be helped, and I must just give a fancy price since I can't buy it at a fair one. Beyond this I can't go—you must see that for yourself."

"I see," said the other, and to himself he added, "I should think you couldn't!" The young man's frankness and liberality startled him.

"Then you will speak to Miss Wynne about it?"

"Certainly—certainly."

Thomas Brydon looked straight at him. After a moment's silence, "Shall you advise her to accept it?" he said.

"Yes. Yes, I shall advise her to accept it."

"That's all right then." And the young fellow got off the corner of the table, and looked about for his hat.

"I'm not so sure," said Eddington, but the discouraging words were accompanied by an encouraging smile. For Mr. Eddington *was* tolerably sure. Miss Wynne had always behaved as if she considered him an oracle. "She's a sensible young woman," he said to himself, as he went off to tell her of Thomas Brydon's offer, and to explain to her, in his best paternal manner, that she had better say "Yes."

But the foolish young woman said "No." She did not want any offers—did not want to part with her house. She was very much distressed, but she said more than once that it was impossible—impossible. Would he please tell Mr. Brydon? She hoped there was some other piece of ground which would do as well for the cottages he wanted to build.

"He doesn't think there is—luckily," said the lawyer.

Brydon was indignant, incredulous, bewildered. In the first shock of his disappointment he took the whole town into his confidence, almost as completely as he had taken Mr. Eddington, and without meaning any harm he set everybody talking about Mary Wynne. The unlucky girl felt as if she were living under a microscope. She did not blame Brydon for his thoughtlessness. It did not even occur to her sweet submissive soul that he might have screened her had he tried; she accepted this uncomfortable publicity as the natural result of her own obstinacy, and lived resignedly in a Babel of argument. Some people thought she was right. Most people were sure she was wrong. Everybody knew better than she did. The vicar, and a good many ladies of his congregation, felt that a young woman ought to take advice, and ought not to stand in the way of a public improvement, and an increase of

fortune evidently intended by Providence. Young Haldane and one or two more rejoiced in the rebuff to Brydon's over-confidence. Other young fellows thought Mary a fool for not taking advantage of the mill-owner's hobby. One and all had something to say about it.

Mary herself minded nothing, not even the good advice, so much as the humorous commendation of some elderly gentlemen, who professed to find her an amazingly clever woman of business. They would ask her, with intense appreciation of their own wit, to suggest investments for their superfluous cash. "Miss Wynne knows a good thing when she sees it," they would say, "but there's no getting anything out of her, she's so uncommon close." "Quite right too," another would chime in; "she wouldn't have done so well for herself if she'd chattered to you. She knew better, didn't you, Miss Wynne?" And one perhaps would add, in more serious kindness, "Never you mind them, my dear, you can't do better than stick to Eddington. He knows what he's about—he'll get you a good price. You are quite right not to be in a hurry. Ladies so often are, and it's a great mistake."

Mary was glad when Mr. Eddington proposed to bring Brydon to her little tennis party. It was like coming face to face with the enemy after a series of rumours and alarms. If only she could muster up courage to tell him plainly that his persistent offers were useless, that she never could accept them! If only she could say this once for all, and then bar the door against him, and against the thought of Garden Lane!

Well, he had been and he had gone, and what had come of it? Nothing but a promise that she should not be molested for the remainder of the year, a promise which was only a continual silent proffer of his terms, from which she could not escape for a moment, look which way she

would. Nothing else, unless it were a keener sense of the shame, and squalor, and obscure misery that surrounded her. It seemed to her that night that she was actually hemmed in by a rising tide of hate and nameless sin, that it was seething and swelling in the lanes about her house, that it was only by a strenuous effort of her will that she maintained the barriers which guarded her, as if she were thrusting with her weak woman's hands against a yielding door, and fearing to see evil faces rising above the wall. She drew back from the window, scared by the freaks of her overwrought imagination. If Philip would but come quickly, quickly, to relieve her of her guardianship!



## V

### OF DRAINAGE

EDDINGTON received the notice of the compact between Brydon and Miss Wynne with good-humoured contempt. "It's not to be mentioned to her again," said the young man, with the authoritative manner which he usually reserved for the factory. "Not a word more about it."

The lawyer laughed. "As you please," he said, "but you would do better to talk it over."

"Talk it over!" cried Brydon. "Haven't we talked it over?"

"Yes. Take my advice and do it again."

"What's the use? We've talked it to death. I've no more to say, and she's sick of the whole concern."

"So much the better for you," Eddington replied astutely. "You are throwing away your best chance."

Brydon considered the question from this point of view. "*I don't think so,*" he said slowly. "And if I am I can't help it. I can't set to work to worry a woman out of her determination. Let her be."

"Well," said Eddington, "you think you know best, so there's no more to be said."

"That's it, exactly," Brydon agreed, and nodded a farewell.

Perhaps all the town was sick of the subject too. It

was curious to note how utterly it was dropped as the summer went on, as if it had been finally settled at the tennis party that the mill-owner was worsted. Miss Wynne could go where she pleased and hardly hear a remark. Even Eddington's enforced silence became natural, so soon did he cease to trouble himself about the business. It was a failure, and he put it aside, having other things to think of.

Brydon talked no more about cottages. He took his rents for such of the unwholesome tenements as belonged to him, and went backwards and forwards through Garden Lane with an indifference which appeared to be complete. Once, about three weeks after the tennis party, he saw Miss Wynne, who had just stepped out of her garden, a little in advance of him. She had a nosegay in her hand, and was herself a delicate and flower-like presence in the unsavoury little thoroughfare. Brydon slackened his pace, but she looked back, recognised him, bowed, blushed, and then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, gave the flowers to an old woman standing near, and fled.

The mill-owner came lounging up, nodded to old Mrs. Humphreys, and stopped short. Mrs. Humphreys was examining her acquisition rather doubtfully, clutching the stems in one unclean hand, while with the other she hitched her cap on one side and scratched her head. She was not an agreeable old lady to look at, dirt seemed to be not an accident but an essential part of her, and the black net cap was in the last stage of discoloration and decay. If it had fallen off, it is questionable whether, even in Garden Lane, anybody but Mrs. Humphreys would have cared to pick it up. It would have found its right place in the gutter, but at present it was exalted on Mrs. Humphreys's head, and looked decidedly drunk.

Brydon considered the old woman's dingy wrinkles, the red-rimmed eyes, the streaks of gray hair on her forehead,

the half-fastened gown, and the pale sweet petals of the roses. "You've got some pretty flowers there," he said.

"Pretty enough," Mrs. Humphreys replied. "*She* give 'em me," nodding in the direction of Mary Wynne's flight. "They're well enough for gentlefolks."

"Well, they're sweet for all of us, aren't they?"

"I daresay." She thrust her nose among the tea-scented blossoms. "They're well enough, but give me a bit of old man—that's what I like; or a bunch of walls." Brydon wondered whether there was any touch of sentiment in these preferences. Could it be possible that Mrs. Humphreys long ago had put bits of southernwood in her prayer-book, or in the buttonhole of a Sunday swain? It might be, but he found the idea hideous.

There was another disparaging sniff at the roses. "She might have give me a copper or two—just a copper or two to get a little tea——"

"Gin," Brydon corrected.

Apparently the old lady did not catch the word. She paused, looking at him, but he did not repeat it. "Lor!" she went on, "tea's a wonderful comfort, but *flowers* ain't no good. I can't go sellin' 'em, like those brazen-faced little hussies who run about the streets with 'em, not near as good as these, and won't take an answer. God bless you for a kind gentleman, sir, you've a feelin' 'art, you 'ave, and the Lord grant you may never know what it is to want a shillin'!"

Brydon scowled as he took the roses. "A pore woman's blessin' 'll never hurt you," Mrs. Humphreys called after him as he walked away looking at his prize. He had hated to see the delicate freshly-blown things in foul hands, but he had come too late; they were degraded, they sickened him, they smelt of Mrs. Humphreys. And, after all, Miss Wynne had meant to leave them in Garden Lane. "Here!

take them!" he said, and flung them to some of the dirty little children who were screaming at each other in the gutter.

He never attempted to see or speak to Miss Wynne, choosing to consider the merest greeting from him as part of the molestation which he had promised should cease. But on Sundays, after duly looking into the crown of his hat, his first glance was always towards her pew, a swift, penetrating, furtive glance. When it was withdrawn he felt that her eyes were upon him, and he tingled with the knowledge. Was it with a sense of battle? It might be, for it was strange how intense the consciousness of the silent question between them had become. Now that it was pent in their two hearts they seemed to be drawn together by the very obstinacy of their antagonism, like men who clutch each other in a death struggle. Sunday after Sunday she studied Brydon's resolute air of indifference, and felt the purpose that lay below. Sunday after Sunday he noted a difference in her. Presently people began to say that Miss Wynne was not looking well, perhaps she wanted a change. Her face was smaller and whiter, the sweet mouth a little tremulous. To Brydon it seemed that she was failing in some mysterious way, and yet not yielding, as if some third person had come into their duel and upheld her weakness. Brydon grew fierce in his determination to overcome this invisible opponent. He, as it were, divined Philip, and measured himself against him, thrusting the woman aside. She meanwhile was haunted day and night by spectres from Garden Lane, till she fancied that all the air was poisoned by the breath of their foul sties.

It was September and the days were shortening, and the hint of coming change was on the heavily-leaved trees. Brydon waylaid Eddington one day, shook hands ab-

stractedly, and in the middle of commonplaces about the weather put a point-blank question: "Isn't Miss Wynne going to the seaside or somewhere this autumn?"

"Really," said the lawyer, "I haven't the least idea."

"Well, I wish she would—in fact, I wish you'd speak to her about it."

Eddington arched his brows, and looked at his neat nails. "My good fellow," he said, "Miss Wynne is of age. I'm her lawyer, but I'm not her guardian. Her arrangements are no business of mine, and I was under the impression that they were no business of yours."

"Well—they are. Look here, some of the drains in the lane must be opened; it ought to have been done before, but they've been waiting as long as possible on account of the heat. It seems, however, that matters have come to a crisis, and they'll begin on Wednesday."

"Thanks for the hint. I'll give your delightful property a wide berth."

"You'd better," grinned Brydon. "It might be sweeter than it is at the best of times, when we let sleeping smells lie, but when we stir 'em up——! Well, you'll just mention the matter to Miss Wynne; she'd better go away for a few days. Don't want to give her a fever, you know."

"I'll speak to her—yes. What's to-day—Saturday? Yes, I'll look in this evening."

Miss Wynne was grateful, but she took the warning pensively. "Is Mr. Brydon going away?" she inquired.

"He—oh no! He'll be sure to be about."

"Ah, yes, I suppose so. And what will become of the poor people in the cottages?"

"Oh, well, you know, I don't fancy they'll think much about it. A little worse than usual, that's all they'll notice—accustomed to it, you see. And I'm afraid they can't all arrange to go out visiting. But it won't be for long."

"I see. Thank you so much for coming to tell me, Mr. Eddington." Then, with innocent artfulness, Miss Wynne slid into the discussion of some local topic peculiarly interesting to the lawyer, and dismissed him without any definite answer. He did not notice this, and even if he had, he would hardly have pressed for one; she was duly warned, and of course would take all necessary precautions. But when he reached his own gate he was aware of a red spark wandering to and fro in the mild September dusk; Brydon was smoking his evening cigar in the shadow of his friend's laburnums and limes, and impatiently awaiting his return.

"Is it all right?" he demanded. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, I saw her—yes, of course it's all right. I told her it mightn't be very pleasant in her garden for the next ten days or so, nor very healthy, and she'd better go away for a little change."

"Yes! And she said she would?"

"Oh, of course she will. I say, Brydon, did you hear about the squabble there was at the Mechanics' Institute to-day? Disgraceful, isn't it? I wish we had you on the committee——"

"No,—but did she *say* she would go?"

His companion stared at the dimly seen face and paused, bewildered. "Say it? I don't know that she said it in so many words."

"What did she say?"

Eddington, yielding to the other's absurd persistence, threw a backward light over his memory of the interview. "Asked if you were going away too—and what would be done with all the people in the lane—and then, what did we talk of——?"

Brydon interrupted him. "She won't go."

"Oh yes, surely she will. Why on earth not?"

"I tell you she won't," the young man repeated. "Because she knows we want her to, very likely;" and he murmured "'Quite contrary,'" with a harsh little laugh.

"Very well," said Eddington cheerfully. "She knows all about it now. Let her stay at home if she won't go."

"You haven't half done it; you should have told her she *must*."

"And have her laugh in my face! No, thank you, I've had enough of this business. I've known a good many obstinate and impracticable young people—a good many—" Eddington smiled reflectively, "but you and Miss Wynne beat all. Very likely she won't go—I daresay you are right. You neither of you know what is good for you, or, if you do, you act as if you didn't. Miss Wynne won't listen to advice, and you *will* advise her and *won't* speak to her. Very good, only find another messenger."

Brydon threw the end of his cigar away. "As you please," he said, after a pause, in a hesitating voice. "I suppose I can't do any more, I don't see that I can. It was only because I heard somebody say Miss Wynne wasn't looking well—thought she wanted change. Well, you know, anybody like that—a little below par, you know—might be just ready to take typhoid fever, don't you think? I don't fancy the drains will hurt *me*, I shall go home to sleep, too—and I don't think they'll hurt old Mrs. Humphreys. She *may* find out there's an extra smell, and she'll think the whole business very unnecessary. So will they all, and they'll all go round the corner to the 'Hand and Flower' rather more than usual. But I thought there was just a possibility that Miss Wynne——" He stopped short and made no attempt to finish the sentence, though there was a brief silence.

"Confound you!" said Eddington. "Well, this once more, then. I'll write Miss Wynne a line."

An astounding idea had just crossed his mind. Was it possible that Brydon took an interest in Mary Wynne apart from her possession of the coveted plot of ground? Something in his voice suggested it, and yet, could it be? It might smooth all difficulties if it were so, but Eddington almost laughed aloud at the idea of a courtship carried on by means of the Garden Lane drains and the family lawyer. Surely true love never ran so strange a course before! "Yes, I'll write a line," he repeated.

It was a neat little note in his legal hand. After due apologies for troubling her a second time he ventured to urge her not to expose herself to any danger. "I am much older than you," he wrote, "and I hope the fact may be my excuse for offering my advice. It would be kind of you if you would console me for having lived all these additional years by pretending to believe that they have gifted me with a little wisdom, as well as rheumatism and other troubles. I am not disposed to exaggerate the risk you would run by staying at home for the next few days. I think myself that though real it would be small, but, however small it may be, it is certainly useless, and Mr. Brydon—who perhaps fancies himself somewhat responsible—is very uneasy about it. Pray give us the satisfaction of feeling that you are out of harm's way.

"I believe I once heard you talk of Salthaven. I have a cousin staying there now who thinks it a charming place, bracing and very healthy. If you cared to go there, and she could be of any service in securing rooms, or making any arrangements, I know she would be delighted."

Eddington sent his letter by a messenger early on Sunday morning, and Miss Wynne read it and re-read it as she sat at breakfast. The appeal distressed her. It made a refusal to leave Brenthill seem like an act of wilful folly, and yet she was conscious of a strong reluctance to yield.



She had a feeling, foolish but very feminine, that if by her determination to keep the garden she doomed the inhabitants of the lane to continue in their filth and squalor, she ought at least to share their perils. If any one were to take typhoid fever, Miss Wynne felt it a point of honour to sicken with it too, if possible. September that year happened to be sultry, heavy-aired, and rainless, and the suggestion of Salthaven breezes, blowing over the crisp waves, and the wide, wet sands, came with inviting freshness to her thoughts. But there could be no sea-air for Mrs. Humphreys and the rest.

For a more personal reason Miss Wynne was loth to go. It seemed to her that if once she suffered herself to be thrust out of her fortress she might never return to it. It was a fancy, no doubt, but she was languid and overwrought and her brain was ripe for fancies. Or Philip would come while she was away and not find her—would be shut out of his garden! No, she would not go.

She went to church with a dreary sense of weakness upon her, but she plucked up courage enough to meet Brydon's eyes defiantly, after which interchange of glances both he and she were preternaturally intent upon their books, and unconscious of each other. But when the service was over, and the congregation rustled slowly down the aisles, Miss Wynne, though she gazed straight before her, with partially lowered eyelids, felt that Brydon was at her elbow, moving with her step by step in the crowd. As they passed out of the porch into the open air and sunshine he spoke.

"How d'ye do, Miss Wynne? Fine day, isn't it?"

"Oh, how d'ye do? Yes, very fine, but I thought early this morning it looked as if we might be going to have some rain."

"I shouldn't be sorry," said Brydon, "though I suppose the holiday-makers wouldn't care for it. Going anywhere this autumn?"

"N—no, I think not," Miss Wynne replied, putting up her sunshade, but she must have looked at him out of the corner of her eye, for she was aware that his cool indifference suddenly broke up like ice in spring. The reflection of the red-lined parasol glowed on her delicate skin.

"No?" he said. "How's that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I like home best. It isn't as if one lived in London, you know; I don't feel as if I wanted any change."

"That's nonsense. You know you ought to go."

She inspected the carved handle of her parasol, and the slim light-coloured kid fingers which clasped it, but said nothing.

"You know you ought," he reiterated.

She still was silent, pressing her lips together.

"And, upon my honour," Brydon continued in a low voice, "I believe you won't go because I have urged it! The other time, when you said you had a good reason for refusing me—about the garden, you know—I didn't doubt you. I am sure you have. But what reason have you now? None. I have asked it—that is all—and you will not do it *because* I have asked it!"

She turned her face towards him in the red shadow of her slanted parasol. "Yes," she said, "you are right." He had meant what he said, and yet this strange avowal startled him to speechlessness, though a curious wave of expression passed over the clearness of his gray eyes.

"I *dare* not do it," she said after a moment. "Do not ask me again."

"Why *dare* not?"

"If once I yield," she hesitated, "I feel that it will be the beginning of the end."

"I don't see why. Things will be just the same when you come back. Do you expect to find me throwing up earthworks all over your lawn?"

She smiled faintly.

"Very well," said Brydon, still in the same low voice. "*You must go*, so tell me what you want me to say or do. What will satisfy you?"

His lips, his eyes were on a level with hers, and their speech had a singular directness. "No—no," she whispered, drawing back a step. "You need not say anything. I will go."

"Ah, here is Eddington," murmured the young man.

Mr. Eddington was the vicar's churchwarden. He stepped out of the porch, carrying a miraculously thin umbrella, and having an indescribable air of Sunday about him. He shook hands with Miss Wynne. "I hope you had my note?"

She had regained enough of her gentle calm to answer with a smile. "Thank you so much. I think I will go to Salthaven; I was just saying so to Mr. Brydon."

"There!" said the old gentleman. "I knew you would. But this stupid fellow had taken it into his head you wouldn't."

"You know Miss Wynne better, you see," Brydon replied.

"Yes. But upon my word, Miss Wynne, I was obliged to trouble you a second time, for he was getting desperate. I don't know what he might not have done between this and Wednesday. We might have had him setting the place on fire—burning you out of house and home, and rescuing you in the dead of night, just to get rid of you—eh, Brydon?"

"I'm glad you rescued me from that," said Mary. "Your note was better."

Brydon coloured, looking angrily at the smiling churchwarden. "I'll say good-bye," he exclaimed with some abruptness, and took his leave accordingly.

"He doesn't like being laughed at," said Eddington, glancing after him. "But upon my word it was almost true—he was so determined you should go, and yet so persuaded you wouldn't. I can't think what made him take such a notion into his head; I told him he was wrong. But he's amazingly obstinate. Now can my cousin do anything for you at Salthaven?"

Mary Wynne was never quite sure what she had authorised Miss Eddington to do on her behalf. She agreed to everything the lawyer proposed, and she perfectly remembered that he talked about the Salthaven hotel, and said either that it was extremely bad or extremely good. Apparently she was listening to him as she stood at the pavement's edge, in her light summer dress, a slight, dainty figure, with the sunny rose-colour lighting her pale cheeks, but in reality she was absorbed in a curiously intense perception of the idea which Eddington had laughingly suggested a few moments earlier. The blue sky, the birds flying overhead, the church porch, the stones on which she stood, the stream of well-dressed people, even the neat elderly gentleman who faced her, were less real to her than the vision and sound of a moonless night, gusty and black, a sudden bewildering terror, an uproar of horror in the labyrinth of lanes, a crackling sound, a gathering clamour, a burst of roaring flame, and then through the murky heat and crashing noise, Brydon's face, Brydon's eyes, Brydon's outstretched hands. She shivered helplessly as she stood, looking up at Mr. Eddington, but seeing all her dream of Philip, all her happy garden fancies, drifting away across a

broad glare of fire in heavy clouds of smoke. The fancy was absurd of course, and yet there was something in it which grasped and held her as if it were true. "I'm sure that will be very nice," she said with a sweet smile. "I shall be so much obliged to Miss Eddington." But when she went home she looked musingly at the old house.

## VI

### SALTHAVEN

“The gray sea and the long black land.”

MARY WYNNE liked Salthaven very well. It was not ambitious, it did not pretend to anything startling in the way of scenery, or other attractions. It described itself in the *Salthaven Advertiser* as “select.” That meant that railway did not come within nine miles of it, and that a couple of omnibuses conveyed such visitors as did not hire carriages from Deepwell station.

It was a quiet little place, simple, leisurely, not in the newest fashion. Before it lay its level semicircle of waves and wet sands, behind it a gentle sloping of green meadows, which Salthaven people called hills. There was an esplanade to walk on, and a strip of green, and a jetty. A band came from Deepwell two evenings in the week, and all the Salthaven visitors strolled up and down and listened to it. On these occasions, what with the strains of music, and the smell of cigars and trampled grass, the little place felt itself quite dissipated.

Mary Wynne walked up and down with Miss Eddington. The latter was a bright, rather elderly young lady, who enjoyed all the occupations provided for her at Salthaven. She went every morning to a little service in the new

little church, and then to the shore, where she bathed from one of the little machines which crawled across the expanse of shining sand. She read quantities of novels from the circulating library, she picked up shells and seaweeds, she did fancy work, and was always brightly ready for a little drive, or a little walk, or above all a little stroll on the esplanade by moonlight. Miss Eddington would have liked a moon always, and she was full of regret that it was waning when Mary came. It had been so perfect on the water. She thought the band delightful, and made little romances to fit the people who passed and repassed to its music and the washing of the waves.

She was livelier than Mary, who would sometimes sit silent for an hour or more, hardly turning a leaf of her book, while she gazed out to sea. Mary had her own romance, and when a far-off sail rose white on the horizon and vanished again she would let her fancy fly—who could tell that Philip might not be looking towards the shore from beneath those snowy wings? Sometimes it was just a low trailing cloud of smoke, that came and went, blotting the silver clearness of sky and sea, but it was all the same—white sail or dull smoke might be bearing Philip on his way, and her heart sank within her when ship after ship passed, outward bound, gliding in distant procession across the shining floor.

Yet even these moments of fanciful sadness were brighter and better than thoughts of Garden Lane, not to be blown away by all the Salthaven breezes. Wholesome it might be to fill one's lungs with pure sea-scented air, but imagination grew sick meanwhile in the odours that steamed from the turning of foul soil under an obstinately rainless sky. There was a little paragraph in the *Brenthill Guardian*, which demanded a large share of those seaside meditations. It was a mere sixpennyworth, by the penny-

a-liner's reckoning, but it revealed the fact that there had already been fever a fortnight or three weeks earlier in one of the courts. It made Mr. Brydon's anxiety more intelligible.

Well, it was not her fault. Even if she had consented to part with her garden the moment she was asked, he could not have built his new houses by that time. No, it was not actually her fault, but in intention it was. She knew very well that the owners of Garden Lane would do nothing for their property that they could not be compelled to do, that Brydon with his five or six scattered cottages was powerless, and that she had decided that the wretched tenants of the lane should stay where they were. Suppose there should be an outbreak of typhus fever at her gate! Suppose Mr. Brydon took it and died! Suppose the cholera came! "They ought to take me out of my house and hang me!" said Mary to herself.

Oh, it was hard—hard! It was the one spot of earth on which her heart was set, the only spot, it seemed to her, where she could live. And Providence had so strangely, so miraculously, given her her secret desire, only for Brydon to come in the name of the poor, and lay hands upon it and claim it as a sacrifice. He never would know the meaning of his demand. He was asking her to sell her love!

And, after all, was she certain that it was the best thing to do, even for those poor wretches in the lane? Ten or fifteen years hence might not Brydon regret that he had not established his colony at Holly Hill? Perhaps he might even move it there, and leave the densely peopled neighbourhood without its one sweet patch of green. Nothing could bring that back, but it would live for a while in the memories of the old folks thereabout, and she perhaps would live with it, as the woman who made her



money by selling it for building ground. People just as good as Thomas Brydon would execrate her. If only the property had fallen into better hands, they would say, it might have been saved, and perhaps finally secured for the poor.

But in the meantime there was this fever spectre at her very gates !

Sooner than dwell on the subject in silence she broached it in an airy and general manner in a conversation on the sands. She effaced a capital B which she had drawn with the point of her parasol, and tried to find out what Miss Eddington knew about typhus fever and drains.

Miss Eddington's mind was not singular—that is to say, it ran naturally to the exciting and the terrible. “Oh, have you been reading some of those dreadful horrors in the papers?” she said, and forthwith told of a case she knew, where there was an outbreak of typhus fever in a house, in consequence of defective drainage. “Poor Mr. Morling died, and the eldest boy, a dear little fellow home for his holidays. And poor Mrs. Morling—such a sweet woman—well, she didn't *die*, but she was dreadfully ill, and had to have all her hair cut off, and was left a widow with four little children. Such beautiful hair ! You never saw such beautiful hair—I'm not exaggerating, it came down to her knees. She used to say she believed Mr. Morling fell in love with her for that, he had such a passion for beautiful hair. Of course that was nonsense. I'm sure any one might have fallen in love with her without that—or with very little of it,” said Miss Eddington, unable apparently to imagine an attachment to the absolutely bald. “But it was *lovely*, and really I hardly knew her when I saw her with it all cut short under a widow's cap.”

She stopped doubtfully, perceiving that she ought to have taken a different view of the matter. There was a

curious look on Miss Wynne's face. Was it possible that she was anxious about Mr. Brydon's hair? Miss Eddington was not aware of Mr. Brydon's existence, but she saw that something was wrong. "Of course," she said hurriedly, "a great many people don't die of typhus fever—I mean, you know, very few people have it at all—quite a small percentage, isn't it?" She tried to think of one or two encouraging examples, but the people who didn't have typhus fever seemed so vague and uninteresting compared to Mrs. Morling of the golden locks that she was obliged to give them up. "You never had it yourself, had you?" she asked finally. The question seemed not only safe, but likely to throw light on the cause of these inquiries.

Mary said, "Never!" so that it sounded exactly as if she wished she had. But after a moment she remarked in what was meant for a casual way, "They've got it at Brenthill."

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Eddington; "*what* a mercy you are safely out of the way!"

"Is it? I feel rather like a deserter."

"Oh! But—but—" this hesitatingly and respectfully. "Do you mean—would you *nurse*, or anything?"

Mary drooped in bitter consciousness of helplessness. "They wouldn't let me. And I don't believe I should be a bit of good."

"Then you are much better here."

The air of decision was so encouraging that Mary appealed to this oracle for counsel. "What should you do if people wanted to persuade you to do something you disliked very much, and you were not quite sure whether they were right or not?"

"I shouldn't do what I didn't like unless I were quite sure they were right."

"Not if you were *almost* quite sure—only a few people

said they were not, and you wished so much they mightn't be?"

The explanation might have been more lucid, but Miss Eddington listened with great intensity. "Is it very important?" she asked.

"Very. If I ought to do it, it would be very wicked of me if I didn't."

Miss Eddington considered for a moment, and then, "I think you feel you ought!" she announced suddenly. She was not without acuteness.

"No," said Mary, "I almost wish I did. Then it would be settled. But I *don't* feel sure—I can't."

"You can't really tell which is right?"

"No. I'm quite sure I shall reproach myself, whichever I do."

"It's difficult," said the other, knitting her brows. She picked up a little pebble, and threw it in a general fashion towards the ocean. "I should consult somebody to whom I could explain the whole thing; somebody who could speak with authority, you know. Then I should feel I had done my best."

Mary shook her head.

Her companion put on an air of solemnity—she was thinking of a neat little musical curate at the new church. "If you are really in such perplexity," she said, "there is always——"

"No, no—indeed there isn't; I couldn't!" said Mary, pink as a sea-shell.

Miss Eddington saw that her suggestion was useless. "Well," she concluded, "if I didn't know what was right, and felt so uncomfortable about it, and couldn't ask anybody, I should do what I disliked most. I should feel it was safest."

This view commended itself to the tender feminine

conscience, eager to deaden painful doubts with penance. Mary was silent for some time, brooding over the thought, looking straight before her from under half-dropped eyelids. Yes, if she gave up her garden she might surely feel that no selfish motive had decided her conduct. She could never hold up her head before Philip, if they met in later days, because Philip could never know how much she had suffered ; but surely she need know no shame in her secret thoughts, where shame is bitterest.

Miss Hillier had wished that her artist friend could paint a picture of Mary Wynne, standing in the walled sweetness of her garden. But his picture might have been better still if he could have seen the poor Guardian Genius as she sat at sundown on those barren sands, leaning forward, with her hands clasped loosely about her knees, and her eyes fixed on the low far-off waves over which the autumnal day was fading. Miss Eddington, respecting her companion's meditations, had strolled a little towards the west, and her darkly-defined figure wandered here and there, poking with a parasol at such wonders of the deep as happened to have been washed ashore by the last tide. Mary had forgotten Miss Eddington ; she was gazing fixedly at the renunciation of all her dreams, she was picturing herself homeless and solitary, cast out of Eden into oh, how desolate a world ! " I wish I had never been able to buy the garden ! " she thought. " But I will give it up—I will give it up—unless anything happens before I leave Salthaven. Nine days more before my three weeks are over—something may happen in nine days." Her fancy roved among possibilities. Mr. Brydon might change his plans. Some one might die, and leave him money enough to start his factory at Holly Hill at once. Or they might find that the cottages in Garden Lane must all be pulled down, and he might buy the whole site, and build tall houses instead

of those miserable little hovels. Or might not help come in some other way? She did not turn her head to right or left, and yet, without shaping her thought, she felt that at any moment—now—or now—or now!—Philip might appear, with no sound of steps on the dead sand, walking in the evening light between her eyes and the low rolling tide. Oh, if he did! He should answer Mr. Brydon, and save the garden he loved.

“Don’t you think you ought to be going in?” Miss Eddington gently inquired. “I don’t know what time you ordered your tea, but I said I’d have mine at half-past six.” Mary Wynne rose obediently, and went to her tea, leaving the waves to roll in through the gathering obscurity.

Brydon, meanwhile, took an almost morbid interest in the work that was going on in the lane. Digging revealed horrors—a little modern work, slight, scamped, pretentious, which had completely broken down, and hideous accumulations stored and left in their indescribable blackness. It seemed to Brydon as if men had choked and sickened the kindly earth with filth—could it ever be wholesome and clean again? The labourers who plied pick and shovel stopped to spit, and to apply foul adjectives to their foul job.

The business went on briskly day by day under the long wall, which was steeped from end to end in the ripe autumn warmth. Above its mellowed bricks red rose-shoots took the sun, and flourished lightly in the still air. At night, for the nights were misty and moonless, a red lantern—red as if it glimmered through brooding miasma—tied on crossed bits of wood, announced where danger lay to home-comers from the “Hand and Flower.” Brydon saw the scene under all aspects; apart from any businesslike interest in it, it seemed to fascinate him. He would loiter at a little distance, and gaze at the wall with a doubtful expression.

He was moody, haggard, irritable. One night as he went slowly homeward from his office, smoking his cigar, he paused in Garden Lane, and uttered a fierce ejaculation under his breath. "By God!" he said. "When it comes to the point, I'm no more to be depended on than the rest!"

Eddington told him he looked ill. The mill-owner answered with an inarticulate sound, conveying scorn, and stood with a hang-dog expression, biting his nails. "You'd better run down to Salthaven too," said the good-humoured old gentleman. "You're overdoing it—overdoing it. A little sea-air would do you all the good in the world—your own prescription, you know."

There was a momentary flash in Brydon's shadowed eyes. "Thanks," he said with a deliberate drawl; "I don't think Salthaven air would agree with me. At any rate I'll be worse—a good deal worse before I try it."

"Very good, only don't hang about that sweet lane of yours too much. Dixon tells me he'd no notion what a state the place was in——"

"It's pretty bad."

"Upon my word," the other smiled, "I think from your point of view you had better have let Miss Wynne stay at home."

"On the chance of killing her off and treating with her executors—there's something in that."

"No, but to let her hear about it. She can't realise it out there in the fresh air."

"You're right," said Brydon. "She can't."

"My cousin says she thinks Miss Wynne looks better, but she strikes her as being very delicate," the other went on. "I hope not—I hope not. She may not be a very wise young woman, but she's a very nice one."

Brydon went away with something to think of. "Very

delicate." Yes, very likely. Probably that meant that if she were uprooted she would feel it acutely—perhaps die. Mary Wynne had begun to teach him the meaning of the old garden. He found himself unable to imagine her apart from it ; all the beautiful life which had been fostered through many generations within its walls seemed to him to have blossomed in her. He had come to Brenthill with his head too full of schemes for enlarging his business, and benefiting the workers in his factory, to have time to think much about women. Philanthropy, according to Brydon, had to be made to pay, and required to be sharply looked after. He would neither rob others of their wages nor forego his own. He was deaf to all distant cries for help ; earthquakes, colliery explosions, Indian famines, fires, could not extract a halfpenny from his pocket ; the facts were sad, but they were not in his department, and he was not, as he bluntly said, either big enough or fool enough to undertake the world's work. Given health, he meant to do his own, and it was as much as he could manage. He would never have looked at Mary Wynne if she had not been thrown in his way as an obstacle ; he would have paid her the price of her garden, and forgotten everything but her name where it stood in his cheque-book. But when she thwarted all his schemes, and left him no more than the daily routine of business to fill his mind, he began to think of her with the absorption with which he would otherwise have thought of plans and builders' estimates. Common justice—Brydon wanted to be just—compelled him to own her legal right to refuse to sell, and to try to discover any honest reason for such refusal, with the possibility of which she might be credited. For weeks he seemed to stand face to face with her, questioning her, judging her, gazing at her, and then all at once he woke to the knowledge that this tender, appealing woman had won

her way into his stronghold, that he was fighting with her still, but in his own heart.

How had he thought of women before? Well, he had thought mostly of those who worked in his factory, and he had thought of them with a rough sense of pity and fair play. "Give 'em a chance," he had said scores of times, "let 'em be decently housed, fed, and clothed—yes, and decently taught, and they'll be decent women." And for that he had planned his cottages. It was all right enough and as true as ever, but Brydon was thinking now of something beyond decency. The walled garden had become to him a part of Mary Wynne's charm—the one explained the other. In destroying it he would destroy possibilities, perhaps blight the flowering of other delicate souls. One might grow a very good sort of woman in his little houses, but not Mary Wynne.

Nor was that all. He had thought much of the clean and well-appointed dwellings which he would erect, but when he saw how utterly earth, air, and water could be defiled, he stood aghast. No doubt while he lived he could guard his property, but, if he should die, might not the evil which had befallen Garden Lane come upon his cottages too? Might they not be let and sublet, and swarming families pour in to multiply in their squalor and improvidence where Mary's bushes of myrtle and bay, Mary's great cedars and clustered roses, were rooted now? So to deface what she loved seemed a thing impossible, like laying cruel and violent hands on Mary herself.

Nevertheless, through all these troubled thoughts the man in a blind fashion did feel that he ought to cling to the work which he had undertaken. Before ever he saw Miss Wynne he had pledged himself to old Mrs. Humphreys, and shrill Betsy Barnes, and Ada and Minnie, and the rest of the bold, pale-faced girls who worked at the mill. If



he deserted them, who would take up their cause? And he would not try to persuade himself that Mary Wynne could ever share his philanthropic hopes. Gentle and kindly she would always be, but she would never go down amongst the poor as some women will. She would shrink from their coarse words and ways, from the hideous revelations of brutality and want and wrong, she would be sickened and terrified, her very soul would ache with fruitless compassion. She must live in a walled home, but how sweet that home would be! If it were his—Brydon quivered at the thought—if it were his?

Even so, might not he come out of his paradise to work for his poor in the lane? Why not? And yet in his clear-sighted honesty he said "No" as soon as he had looked the question in the face. Never then would he do anything that could limit Mary's pleasures, or in the smallest degree imperil her future. Wife and children before all the world! There was his mother, too, at Brighton—he could never risk life or health or money when all he was and all he had were needed by these dear ones. No, it was a choice between the garden and Garden Lane.

Was it a choice? It seemed to Brydon that the choice was made for him. How was he to tear this new and strange influence out of his heart? He believed that it would lead him wrong, and yet it was the sweetest and tenderest feeling of which he was capable. "Well," he said at last, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and sitting down to work at his untidy table, "she is out of reach now, and when she comes back I daresay she will say 'No.'" But though he said it he did not really believe it. The advantage he had already gained had quickened his self-confidence; he looked on Mary as half-conquered, and something within him mocked, "She will say 'No' once, but not always. Did she not yield to you and go to

Salthaven? Did you not know when she said 'I will go' that her will was bending before yours and that it needed but a little more to give you your way with the garden? And if she said 'No' to yet a further demand, should you take that word as final?"

Brydon answered these questionings with a laugh, which broke the silence of the room with its brief sound. "Anyhow," he said, leaning forward, pen in hand, "she isn't here now, and I suppose won't be back for a few days. I don't see any way out of it, it's true, but perhaps there is one, and if so we'll give it a chance. Only," he added, as if ensuring fair play by warning an adversary, "the first opportunity I get, I shall speak." And, judging from his set lips and brilliant eyes, he would speak forcibly enough.

So the days went by in their unresting procession, the momentous days that were yet so strangely uneventful. Garden Lane resumed its customary aspect, only with a stony strip down the middle of the roadway, where the main excavation had been. Mrs. Humphreys and the rest turned themselves round discontentedly, and settled down into as much of their former dirt as they could find. At Salthaven the autumnal migration of visitors had set in, and though the lodging-house keepers mechanically put up cards in every window, till the place looked as if a shower of remarkably large snow-flakes had fallen all over it, they did not really expect to attract any one by the announcement of "Apartments." It was not likely. The Deepwell band had ceased to come, there were many vacant seats in the little church which had been so crowded in August, and only four or five bathing-machines went crawling after the gray tide. The season was over, Miss Eddington was gone, and Miss Wynne was packing her trunk, and writing "Brenthill" upon her luggage labels.

Nothing had happened, and Mary said to herself that nothing was going to happen. It drizzled as she went home. She buttoned herself in her waterproof, and sighed at the thought of the gray days that were at hand. Spring-time would come again, no doubt, but if she had given up her garden it would hardly be spring to her.

Yet, though she assured herself that all was over, she carried a faint hope on her journey through the drizzling afternoon. In the omnibus, in the booking-office, in the train, which as she neared home slid ever and anon out of the foggy dusk into wayside stations where gaslights shone with watery lustre on tarpaulin and mackintosh, in every pause she looked for some one or some thing to interpose at that eleventh hour. Even on the crowded platform at Brenthill a possibility lingered, fading slowly as she drove homeward through the ugly familiar streets, dying as her own door closed behind her, and she was received by a melancholy maid who had face-ache, and who said that nothing had happened, and nobody had called.

The next morning a note was delivered at the factory. "Dear Mr. Brydon," it said, "you told me that afternoon you came to my tennis party that you would say no more about the garden till the new year came, but that the offer you had made for it should hold good till then. I have been thinking the matter over at Salthaven, and I have made up my mind to accept it. I believe it is the right thing to do. I have just written to Mr. Eddington to ask him to call on you about it and settle everything.—Believe me, yours sincerely, MARY WYNNE.

"I shall go away from Brenthill as soon as possible, and then you can begin at once. I hope the loss of this summer will not make any great difference." Lower on the page was written hurriedly, "Don't give me too much for it."

Brydon read this letter with a surprise so curiously compounded that he hardly knew whether he were glad or sorry. Glad—yes, of course he must be glad, and yet—by Jove! but he was sorry. He had lost the strange and humiliating delight of sacrificing his noblest ambition to the woman he loved. He had determined to give up the garden with all that it involved for Mary Wynne's sake, and she had forestalled him. She had given it up to him, but not for him. She had done it for conscience' sake, he knew that very well, he could read it in every line of her note. She would not take it back, her conscience would not let her. She was pledged to make the sacrifice, and if he did not build his cottages she would only reproach herself that she had not yielded earlier. He threw the letter on the table, thrust his hands into his pockets, and stood staring at it. The more he looked at it the less he liked it. He had nothing now to give up for her. To give up his sacrifice—that was an absurdity, and yet that was what he found it hard to do.

Why had he sent her away to Salthaven to think it over in solitude, with that delicate remorse of hers? He might have known what would come of it, he might have been sure that she would yield. "And she has yielded," he raged, "but not to me!"

Eddington found him haggard of face and moody in manner that afternoon when he called. He suspected that Brydon, thus suddenly summoned to pay, regretted the extravagance of the offer he had made six months earlier. That, however, was the young man's business, his own was to keep him to the bargain in his client's interest. Perhaps Brydon really had rather the air of a hunter snared in his own toils, but he offered no opposition to the lawyer's arrangements, only interrupting him once to say, "I suppose

Miss Wynne came to this decision entirely of her own free will?"

"Entirely," said the old gentleman with emphasis, and added to himself, "you don't creep out through *that* loop-hole, my good fellow."

"I thought as much," said Brydon.

## VII

### ALL OF ONE MIND

THE news of Brydon's triumph ran rapidly round the circle of Miss Wynne's acquaintances, and re-awakened their flagging interest. "Well!" Jessie Lee exclaimed, "Ethel Hillier made me promise I'd write and tell her when this happened, but I didn't expect to have to do it. I suppose the money was too much for her." That was the general opinion in Brenthill, that the mill-owner's money had proved irresistible. People could no longer call Miss Wynne a fool, but they transferred the charge of folly to the young man who was paying a ridiculous price for her bit of ground.

Eddington came out of the affair with great glory. It was understood that he had opposed the sale till the utmost penny had been wrung out of Thomas Brydon, and then had persuaded his client to yield. The young folks had been puppets in his hands and he had pulled the strings very skilfully indeed. Brydon ought to have known that he could not be a match for the lawyer. It was really sublime, the way in which Eddington had turned Miss Wynne's sentimental fondness for the garden to profit.

The *Brenthill Guardian* took the matter up in an article headed "APPROACHING DESTRUCTION OF AN INTERESTING RELIC." The young man who wrote it looked up

a book about Brenthill, printed many years earlier by a local archæologist, and found the old garden mentioned several times—once when there was a dispute about a boundary, on the settlement of which the wall in Garden Lane was built, and on two or three occasions when bits of the land were sold. He ascertained that the factory which was about to swallow up the last remnant of “this historic pleasure-ground” stood on a fragment of it. The house was comparatively modern.

The worst of it was that, historic as this pleasure-ground might be, the intelligent young man who called it so could not discover that any one had ever owned it, or spoken of it, or visited it, who was of the smallest interest to mankind. The garden had no tradition beyond that of its blossoming summers. He did not lose courage, however, but went to the Mechanics’ Institute, brushed up his history a little, and wrote almost a column more about all the wonderful things that the possessors of the garden might have seen. If they had not seen them they must have heard of them, which did as well. What tidings of bloodshed and terror and revolution, of heroism and crime, of storm and fire and plague, had stirred the air beneath those leafy boughs! And with these memories he mingled little allusions to bygone customs and things, to sedan chairs, coaches, and highwaymen, to country fairs and bull-baitings, to May-day dancing and fashionable assemblies, to hoops and patches and powder, to melodious tinkling of spinets and clavichords. He touched very lightly, the authority not being so readily accessible, on the changes in horticulture, the new and vivid blossoms that had opened under English skies since the old garden was first planted, and when he had thus arrived at the end of his column he felt rather pleased with himself. He thought, hesitatingly, that it was a little in Macaulay’s manner.

The young lady to whom he was engaged was sure it was—only better.

It answered its purpose, anyhow, for the readers of the *Guardian* got an indistinct impression that there was something monumental about the patch of ground which "our energetic fellow-townsmen" was about to lay waste. Jessie Lee added a postscript to her letter: "I send you our newspaper, which will tell you all about the history of the garden. I never knew it was so old or so interesting, did you? What a pity it is going to be destroyed!" And a committee of ladies, who were planning a bazaar for charitable purposes to be held early in the summer, sprang at the idea of utilising the historic spot. Such a delightful chance of wearing old English dresses—illustrating all the different periods, you know—and such a sentiment about the whole thing, all the trees and shrubs doomed, and spared just for that last day. Would it not be touching? And one might sell plants and flowers from *De Dide Gardenne*. That would be charmingly pathetic, such a sweet idea, and all clear profit, since everything must be rooted up when the bricklayers began to work. It could not make any real difference to Mr. Brydon, he would only have to put off his building a little, and Garden Lane had gone on as it was so long that there could not be any *hurry* about the new cottages. And when he was told that it was for a charity, and that the ladies of Brenthill asked it as a personal favour, he would not of course refuse. The matter was as good as settled.

Meanwhile the garden, every inch of whose surface was so soon to be laid bare to the gaze of the whole town, had never been so jealously guarded as it was this October. Mary Wynne shut herself up in it, did not go out, even to church, and refused to see visitors. It appeared that she was suffering, at her leisure, from headache.



She was well enough, however, to loiter round the mossy walks, listening to the cawing of the rooks, and looking at every plant and tree with gentle eyes that filled with tears. Even if there had been no thought of Philip she would have been sad. It was such a short and piteous span of life that yet remained to all around her, and it was she who had decreed that it should end. She felt like a murderess, and yet nobody loved each leaf and flower as she did. "There will never be any more spring," she said under her breath, amid the sad splendour of autumn colouring. "Oh, my poor double thorn, you will never blossom like tiny white roses again!" Her heart ached for the shrubs and plants which were making ready for their winter rest; she even thought of the bulbs, asleep long since in the black earth at her feet. She fancied something menacing and strange in the gloom of the great unchangeable cedars. She raised her eyes to them, "You are dead," she said, trying to realise the truth she uttered. "Dead—and I have killed you."

Later in the month the leaves had almost all fallen from the lime-trees, and the strong pulses of the looms throbbed behind the bare red wall. Elsewhere in the garden the thinned foliage, out of which all the summer greenness was gone, the delicate twigs etched on the faint blue of the October sky, the chill that crisped the air, the autumn crocuses and purple violets, combined to make a kind of mockery of March, as if a phantom spring had come to bid its haunt farewell.

Mary thought this one morning as she went down the walk by the limes. The shining of the pale sun overhead was pathetic, her soul was heavy with repentance, a thousand regrets were gnawing at her. Oh why had she ever yielded and sinned against her love? She did not forget the shameful misery which lay huddled beyond the wall, but

she could not recall that vivid sense of it which had prompted her renunciation. Her imagination was blunted.

"And yet," she reminded herself, "it is all there—it is as real and as hideous as it was then. If I could only feel it!" She went to the little door and stood with her hand upon the latch. "Now," she said, "I have only to lift this and I shall see it all. I shall see all the ugly wretchedness I could not bear even to think of at Salthaven——"

She lifted the latch and stood face to face with Philip.

It was as if the whole world had gathered itself into his eyes. It was more than she could bear, it was pain. Her heart seemed to stand still, her sight failed. For a fraction of a second his face went out like a light in darkness.

"You here?" he cried, and at the sound of his voice his face came back. "A thousand pardons—I have startled you! How clumsy of me!"

"No, no." She moved backward a little as he touched her hand in greeting. "Come in."

"May I?" He stepped across the threshold. "You didn't expect to find any one standing staring on the step. Of course you took me for a tramp, or a lunatic."

"No indeed," she protested. "I knew you were—you."

"Yes, when you had time to think about it. Ah! the old garden, just the same as ever." He had closed the gate behind him, and without offering to advance stood gazing round. His lips began to curve and his nostrils to widen a little, in quick appreciation of the subtle autumn odours of earth and fallen leaf. He drank the golden air as if it were delicate wine, and his glancing eyes brightened in recognition of bush and tree. "Yes," he smiled, "as beautiful as ever, isn't it?"

"It was summer when you were here before," she said.

"You like the summer best? Well, perhaps—yet this

suits the occasion. You know the old place is going to be turned into building ground?"

His tone spoke volumes, and the white roses of her cheeks bloomed suddenly pink. Evidently he did not know that *she* had sold it. "Yes, of course," she said; "you never heard——"

"That's a lie, 'Liza Barnes!" screeched a childish voice, apparently about six inches from Philip's elbow. "Yer took 'is 'apenny—I see yer do it, and I'll tell yer mother; I will."

He sprang from the door, and then laughed. "Little imp!" he said.

"Come further in, won't you?" said Mary, moving away, and not caring to show her quickened colour. Was this Philip Wargrave, who had filled her whole world for so long! He seemed strangely far away, and a curious sense of loneliness and unreality was stealing over her.

"*May* I?" he asked as he followed. "Are you staying here, then? They told me nobody could get in, and I was wandering round the enchanted ground, devising all manner of expedients to effect an entrance, when you came to the rescue, and I assure you, Miss Medland, you realised my idea of a beneficent fairy."

"Did I? How very nice!" She was growing desperate, and snatched at the chance of explanation he gave her. "But you are behind the time—you don't know that I'm not Miss Medland any longer."

(Oh, what *would* he say when he found that she had sold the garden?)

Wargrave stopped, stared, arched his brows. "*What! married?*" he cried with cheerful readiness. "You don't say so!" A pleasant light of congratulation was dawning in his eyes.

It was all over. The bright indifferent smile was like a

flood of sunlight on pale dreams; and Mary woke. "No, no," she said, with something of his own readiness, "I'm not married, but I've changed my name. I'm Miss Wynne now, not Miss Medland."

"Oh, but this is awfully puzzling, you know. You are not Miss Medland;" he uttered the words very slowly; "yes, I think I have mastered that. And you are—Miss Wynne."

"Yes."

Philip suffered his breath to escape in a faint whistle. "You are Miss Wynne—but *you* have sold the garden, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose everything must have an end. I always thought somebody would build on it one of these days, but—Got a good price for it, I hope?"

"Yes, very good."

"That's well. After all I suppose one may pay too dearly for sentiment—it wouldn't do to sacrifice one's life to a garden, would it? No, I think you are right—I've no doubt it was the best thing to do."

"Only you wouldn't have done it?"

"Oh, I don't say that. I daresay I might if I'd been sufficiently tempted. Besides, I don't think it's quite a parallel case; you see I knew the place before the time when I met you here; I stayed with the Macleans a long while ago when I was a lad. I suspect the old garden was more to me than to you—naturally, you know."

O heaven! The garden was more to him than to her—"naturally, you know." More to him! when she would have watered it with her heart's blood to keep it fair for his home-coming. And she shivered as she walked by his side, because it seemed to her that the leaf-sprays which he brushed with his slim fingers as he spoke must

surely betray her, must burst into some novel and splendid blossom to greet him for whom they and she had waited so long.

"Yes," said Philip, "no doubt you were right." He looked up suddenly, "I'd forgotten that tree—what is it?"

"It's a pear," said Mary.

"A pear-tree—what a height! How do you get the pears? Ah! I suppose one doesn't notice it when the acacia is in leaf. But it's picturesque, isn't it? And how sunny it looks up aloft there with its few yellowing leaves! Yes, as I was saying, I'm sure you've acted for the best."

"I hope so."

"For, after all, it will always be a memory, won't it? And this is a very pleasant ending. But I *was* surprised when the gate flew open and there you were! Though for that matter I wasn't as much surprised as you were—I'm certain you took me for my own ghost."

"Well," said Mary, "I didn't expect to see you. I thought you were abroad."

"Abroad? What made you think that? No, I'm living in West Kensington—why should I be abroad?"

"I thought you were in New Zealand with your brother."

"Oh no! I've been in Kensington for a year and a half—nearly two years. Who told you I was going to New Zealand? No—did I really? By Jove, what an unconscionable fellow I am! I'm always telling people all my hopes and fears. I don't know why they are so kind, I wonder they don't kick me out for a bore. Yes, I did think once, when my uncle married, that I might have to go, but I always felt as if something must turn up. It would have been too absurd—fancy me in New Zealand!"

"Something did turn up then?" said the girl faintly.

"Well, yes. My uncle's marriage wasn't such a calamity after all. His wife took rather a liking to me, I think

(another of the kind people!), and the old gentleman said he'd continue my allowance for a bit. He is always dabbling in stocks and shares, you know, and he made one or two lucky hits just about that time. So there was an end of the New Zealand scheme, and I started on my own account, with a commission to paint my aunt's picture to begin with."

"And you are succeeding?"

"That's too much to say," Philip answered with his pleasant smile. "But I think I may succeed some day—I've good friends, and good hopes. Ah, by the way, Miss Medland—Miss Wynne, I mean (why didn't you keep your old name too? It would have been very nice, Medland-Wynne, and would have given one time to think), by the way, you might be one of the good friends if you would."

"What do you mean? I couldn't have my portrait taken!" cried Mary, with frightened eyes.

"Oh no!" Wargrave laughed, "I don't tout for orders like that! No, don't apologise, it did sound exactly like it. No, but you might let me make a study of the garden. I came down to see if that were possible, and then heard it was such a dragon-guarded spot——"

"Oh, of course!" said Mary. "Yes, I can do that for you."

"Who knows?" said Philip with a graver smile. "It may be the stepping-stone to fortune. Do you remember a Miss Hillier who came with some friends of yours in the spring? Well, she took it into her head that I should find the subject for a picture here—a girl's figure with the old garden for a background. *A Guardian Genius* she wanted to call it, but I think I'd rather have it *Eligible Building Ground*. What do you say?"

"Yes, I think perhaps it would be best."

Wargrave nodded. "I think it's an idea," he continued

confidentially. "Suppose the garden had fallen into the hands of some one to whom it was a real pain to part with it—some one like Ethel Hillier herself for instance—compelled to give it up, say by loss of fortune—can't you fancy the last pathetic look round the dear old place? Yes, I think she was right."

"Do you know Miss Hillier very well?"

"Pretty well," said the young man. He paused by a rosemary bush, broke off a shoot and looked fixedly at it, smiling and even colouring a little in a very becoming manner. "The fact is I'm engaged to be married. I've been engaged since the spring, and Ethel Hillier and Evelyn—she's a Miss Seymour—are sworn friends. If this thing were a real success——"

"Well, you must make it so," said Mary. "And you must let me congratulate you."

It was speedily arranged that the young man should begin work at once. "There is no time to lose in these October days," he said. "I put up at the 'Horn,' in the High Street, you know, last night. I'll just go and get what I want—it isn't far."

Mary saw him off, gave orders to the maid that he was to be re-admitted on his return, and then went up to her own room and closed the door. She had been quite calm and composed through all the latter part of her talk with Philip, and she was quite calm now. She sat down by her bedside and gazed blankly at the light-coloured wall, on which her shadow was faintly pencilled by the pale sunshine.

It is curious how quickly the great changes come which shape us and all our destinies. It is a moment, not an hour, which turns love to hate, or despair to hope. In a lightning flash the whole aspect of the world is transformed, sun, moon, and stars are new in new heavens, the tides and currents of our lives are all reversed. It was not twenty

minutes since Philip had turned to her with shining eyes and ready congratulations. "*What! married?*" The words rang yet in her ears, though, as it seemed, she had lived a lifetime since they were spoken.

She felt sick and strange with a horror of her foolish passion. He had never thought of her, never cared for her, he was "always telling people his hopes and fears," and she had carried these easily uttered, hackneyed confidences of his in her heart, not suspecting that she shared her treasure with Miss Evelyn Seymour, Miss Ethel Hillier, and, most likely, half a dozen more. For the sake of such words as these she had suffered in silence, she had fought against her conscience the whole summer through, she had left the people at her gate to fever and misery. Yes, but, thank God, she had yielded before she knew the truth—thank God! thank God! Now she would escape from Brenthill, and the garden would be destroyed, the beautiful, hateful garden. It would drive her mad to live through another round of seasons shut in by its walls. Life had been nothing but a long malarious dream since first she knew the place, a bewildering, blossoming, suffocating dream, full of idle fancies and memories and cravings. She was overwhelmed with hot shame, she thought she would never draw breath freely till the last tree fell, and the last fibre of root was torn from the soil.

A bell jangled sharply through her reverie. Philip back from the "Horn" already? She sprang to her feet and went to the glass to make a critical inspection of her colour and expression. As she bent forward to the face which leaned to meet her there came a knocking at the door.

"I suppose that is the gentleman who left just now?" she said, without turning her head. "Ask him if he likes to go straight into the garden."



"No, miss, it isn't that gentleman." And the maid presented a card on which was inscribed, "Mr. Thomas Brydon," with a hurriedly written line below, "Pray let me see you for five minutes."

Her champion, her deliverer—what could he have to say to her? Perhaps he had some scheme for facilitating her departure, he might be too impatient to wait till after the sale, which was fixed for the middle of November. "Show Mr. Brydon into the drawing-room," she said, as she refastened the little brooch at her throat. It hampered her, she could not breathe.

She found her visitor standing at the window looking out, a small sharply-cut silhouette against the clear glass. He turned and came forward.

"Thank you for letting me speak to you," he began hurriedly. "They told me you didn't see anybody, but as it was a matter of business——" All at once he broke off and looked at her. "How are you? Did you like Salthaven?"

"Very much. I'm very well, thank you. Mr. Eddington told me I was brown."

"Brown? You look different. Are you well, really?"

"Quite well, except for a headache or two. I think it feels close here after the sea-breezes. Won't you sit down?" By this time Mary had drawn him away from the window, and the light fell on his face. "*You* don't look very well, Mr. Brydon."

"I'm well enough, only a bit worried," he said shortly. "It's about this business of ours."

"I guessed as much. You want to come in sooner—is that it?"

"Not exactly. The question is about my coming in at all."

Mary gazed at him with parted lips, but did not speak.

"Look here," said Brydon, "I've been thinking things over, and the more I think the less I like this plan of mine. What right have I to turn you out of your home? When I first proposed it I thought it was only a matter of money, but it has never been a matter of money with you. Suppose I fail in my scheme—suppose my factory doesn't answer and my cottages fall into bad hands—then I shall have robbed you of your garden, and all for nothing, for worse than nothing. After all, there must be some risk whichever way I set to work—why shouldn't I take the risk at Holly Hill? It might only be waiting a little, and perhaps it would be best; indeed, I think it might be. And you would be glad, wouldn't you?"

The words were uttered in tones of unwonted softness, but Mary could not answer. O heaven! was this garden to live and flower in spite of her? Was she to be caught and thrust back into it, to dwell for ever with empty mocking memories—the garden living and everything else dead, even the throbbing of the looms silenced behind the long red wall?

"Tell me," said Brydon; "you would be glad?"

"Glad," she repeated in a strangled meaningless voice. "You have changed too, then?"

"Yes, I've changed—time I did, I think. What is the matter?"

"Not you! I never thought you would change!"

"Of course not. I didn't think so myself."

"You told me you would not!" she cried. "I was so sure of you. I thought you cared for those poor people—that you would be true to your plans; I thought that any time—any time—and I put it off, and now I have tired you out and it is too late!"

"No, no," Brydon exclaimed, "it isn't like that—don't you reproach yourself. I know what you are thinking of.

But if I can really manage to do without your garden—why did I ever torment you so about it?—if you could keep it with a clear conscience——” (“If I could keep *you* for ever close at hand!” he was thinking as he stammered over his spoken words.)

“Mr. Brydon, you are giving me more for the garden than it is worth,” Mary interrupted him with passionate abruptness. “I know it—I have known it all the time. I don’t want so much. Take it, but only give me half for it. That will be enough—it will indeed. I want you to build your cottages—you must! you must! I will tell Mr. Eddington that it is my doing.”

The small young man had started to his feet, and seemed to have grown taller. He faced her, he was furious.

“Thank you, Miss Wynne! So you think that is at the bottom of it—you think I came here to try to sneak out of my bargain because I didn’t like the price, and wasn’t man enough to say so! Well, if you *wanted* to clinch the business you’ve gone the right way to work, for I’ll have the garden now, by God! And you’ll take my offer, for the matter has gone too far—unless we both agreed to break it off, and that I won’t do!”

“Don’t! don’t! I can’t bear it,” said the girl. “I didn’t mean that—you must know I didn’t. I don’t know what I did mean, but not that—I couldn’t! You must be more patient with me, please!”

“I’m a brute!” said Brydon instantly. “I beg your pardon.”

There was a brief silence. “I don’t quite understand,” he continued after a moment. “You wish me to take it?”

She answered “Yes,” with pale lips that scarcely uttered a sound.

“Then of course I will. And I will do the best I can. Perhaps,” he said musingly, “I might use part—a strip by

the factory, and another bit at the lane end, you know. If I had the frontage there——”

“But you must build your cottages,” she said again. “I thought of them while I was at Salthaven. I ought to have let you begin in the spring. Why did you never tell me the people in the lane had had fever?”

“It wasn’t much. Only two cases, and they are all right.”

“If they had died it would have been my fault.”

“Hardly,” said Brydon. “But I knew you were feeling like that when you wrote to me after you came back.”

“And you will build?” she insisted, colouring with a guilty consciousness of the mixture of motives which he could not divine.

“Yes, I will build. But if I can spare a bit near the house, just two or three elms for a home for your rooks, a bit of turf, and that old buttressed wall with the lilies and the lavender at the foot of it—the wall with the tufts of snapdragon—you would like that? You would like to know that that bit was safe and cared for wherever you were, wouldn’t you? And perhaps some day you would come back and see it?”

Mary shook her head. “No,” she said, “I thank you a thousand times, but let the garden go; I ought to have given it up before now. I would rather it all went; I would, really. Don’t cramp the cottages to save a useless piece of it.”

“I know what that means,” said Brydon, looking steadily at her.

“And pray what does it mean?” But she herself knew so well what it meant that she could not meet his gaze.

“It means that you will never come back. That you can give up the whole as readily as the half because nothing will ever induce you to set foot in Brenthill when once

your garden has been touched. That you will remember it as it is now, and hate the thought——”

“No,” cried Mary, moved by a sudden impulse. “I never will come back to the garden or any part of it——never! But if you will take it and carry out your plan—if you will make amends for all my selfishness and folly——” She had risen and faced him with eloquent eyes.

“What will you do?”

“I will come back and see your cottages when they are built.”

She was startled at her own words, as if an alien voice had uttered them; she could not think what had prompted her. She could almost have doubted whether she had spoken them had it not been for Mr. Brydon’s face.

“I take that as a promise,” he said simply. “You will let me know where you are, and you shall hear when they are finished.” He was content to say no more, and held out his hand instantly in leave-taking.

Mary accompanied him to the hall, where they found Philip Wargrave, who had just been admitted by the maid. The men looked a little curiously at each other, and she introduced them, not without a touch of wondering pride in her own calmness. “Mr. Wargrave is going to make a sketch of the garden for his next picture,” she added in an explanatory tone.

“A little remembrance of a favourite spot, just for a background, you know,” said Philip, smiling regretfully. “I’ve heard of you from Miss Hillier.”

Brydon murmured something about “the pleasure of meeting Miss Hillier in the spring.”

“You made a deep impression, I assure you,” said the young artist. “She took such an interest in the garden. I think myself there is a peculiar charm about the dear old place.”

"It *is* very pretty," the mill-owner agreed. "I remember Miss Hillier admired it."

"Yes, and she remembers you—as Adamant! I believe she habitually thinks of you as the Desolator, for she was sure you would get your own way."

"Mr. Brydon came this morning to tell me he could do without the garden," said Mary quietly, in her clear voice.

"No!" cried Wargrave. "Oh, Miss Medland, you might have spared me this!"

"Spared you what?"

"Oh, why did you tell me? Why didn't you leave me in ignorance till my picture was finished? Why did you upset your arrangements to-day of all days?" He bemoaned himself tragically, and yet with a little laughing self-mockery about his lips. "Here was I, steeped to the very eyes in sentiment; to my finger tips," he stretched out his long slender hands, "I've been steeped in it ever since Ethel Hillier came back; I was aching deliciously with helpless regret for the old garden; I believe my work would have been a masterpiece of pathos—oh, a masterpiece!—and you and Mr. Brydon have conspired together to ruin it. It will be a sham now, the trees and I posing together in a make-believe farewell. It's cruel! cruel! One doesn't have such fine feelings every day of one's life." And Wargrave threw himself on one of the hall chairs, while Brydon stood and smiled.

"You'd better go and paint the masterpiece. I didn't accept Mr. Brydon's sacrifice—it's all right," said Mary.

"I'll undertake that the trees haven't six weeks to live, if that will do," the Desolator chimed in encouragingly.

"Oh!" said Philip getting up, and looking from one to the other. "Well, you've spoilt my morning, anyhow. What do you suppose I'm going to do after such a shock

as this? I shall have to meditate sadly on inexorable fate till I can get myself into tune again."

"Meanwhile we all seem to be of one mind at last," said Mary with a little lingering emphasis as she shook hands with Brydon.

The sale is over, it is late in November, and Miss Wynne left Brenthill ten days ago. Philip Wargrave is at work in his West Kensington studio; he has high hopes of his picture. He certainly never planned anything before which promised half as well as this. Ethel Hillier is standing for the figure of the Guardian Genius; Philip asked her because he felt that he and she really understood and cared for the old place as no one else did.

Brydon is exceedingly unpopular in Brenthill just now. The Ladies' Committee abuse him over their teacups for his refusal to spare the "historic pleasure-ground" till May or June, when they intend to hold their bazaar in aid of Female Education in India. He answered their deputation—of whom he secretly stood in extreme terror—with the desperate frankness of a shy man compelled to speak. When they assured him that it could not really make any difference if the people in the lane waited a few months longer for their cottages, and that he could begin to build just as well in July, he told them that they didn't know what they were talking about, and it was perfectly absurd. They did not like this. And when he offered them a barrow-load of historic brickbats to sell as souvenirs, they took his innocent readiness to oblige them for a mocking insult, threw his brickbats, figuratively, in his face, and went away to give various very graphic versions of the interview, in all of which Mr. Brydon came off very badly indeed. And if the ladies are displeased, so also are the good folks in the lane—they can't think what call he has

to be meddling there. It was well enough if he would have let things be, but this is worse than the mess he made there in the summer with his nasty dirty drains. It was a pity somebody couldn't go and muddle about Mr. Brydon's own house till he didn't know which way to turn, and see how *he'd* like it.

The young man takes no heed of scowling brows, but goes his way with an obstinately good-humoured look on his face. The work of destruction advances fast, and he stops late at night to inspect it on his way home from the office. The workmen have made a wide cartway through the wall where the little door used to be, and he looks in through the great yawning breach. The gaslight shines on its jagged edges, but there is a thin white fog which makes the garden beyond, with its poor remnant of trees, like a place of sheeted ghosts. The cedars are down already, the double thorn, broken and disconsolate, stands waiting its fate, the rooks have been scared away, the turf in the foreground, "mossy-fine," is seamed with gaping ruts. It will soon be all over. Dead, long ago, the hands that planted those trees and laid those bricks, and the whole garden is vanishing like a picture seen in the fire, or a drifting smoke-wreath, vanishing in the love-quarrels, ambitions, and plans of little lives, so brief beside its long, persistent growth. Thomas Brydon, stumbling over fragmentary building materials as he leaves the spot, has no time for its memories—he is too intent on the thought of the cottages which Mary Wynne will come some day to see.





MRS. AUSTIN



## MRS. AUSTIN

### I

"ALL women are matchmakers—some for themselves and the rest for other people," said Mr. Francis Leicester. He stood on his own hearthrug, with his back to his own chimney-piece, and surveyed the subject comprehensively from that advantageous position. And he was entitled to have an opinion of his own about it, for he was nearly three and twenty.

Two ladies were present. "Which am I, pray?" said the younger, instantly accepting the challenge. She looked up at the speaker with great bright brown eyes, like those of some sylvan creature. "Which am I—for myself or for other people?"

Frank laughed and turned away a little, gazing at a golden effect of September sunshine on an old family portrait. "Oh, I'm not going to be personal," he said; "you don't catch me so. I mean women in general."

"Oh, women in general! I don't care for women in general," said Miss Vivian. "And I don't much believe that anybody else does."

"I may say what I like, then?"

She nodded gravely. "Yes; on the understanding that it doesn't apply to anybody in particular."

"I'm afraid, perhaps, that won't be very interesting," said Frank doubtfully.

"I'm quite sure it won't be; it makes me yawn only to think of it."

"But this does apply to somebody," said young Leicester's mother, smiling, from her easy-chair. "Frank means me. Whenever he wants to make rude remarks about anything I do, he always calls me women in general. But this time he ought to be ashamed of himself, for—thank goodness!—whatever I may be, I am *not* a match-maker."

"Say that again!" Leicester exclaimed. "To-day of all days!"

"Well, I am *not*," she repeated firmly. "I don't want to make a match of it, I'm sure. Only it seemed hard that they shouldn't meet somewhere, and have another chance."

"Just so," said Frank. "Let's hope they'll profit by it. I should think they might know their own minds by now; they are getting rather elderly, these lovers of yours, aren't they?"

"Elderly—well, they are not so young as Tiny here; but they are a good deal younger than I am. I don't see why they shouldn't have their feelings as well as other people."

"Oh, I've no objection," said Frank, with his hands in his pockets, and his chin a little higher than usual. "If I wanted to make a match, it should be a new one while I was about it, not a *réchauffé* affair like this. But that's your concern, and I'm sure I wish you all success. Give them their wedding-breakfast, if you like. I'll throw old shoes after them; and go in for all the rest of the foolery with the greatest pleasure." He turned to Tiny Vivian. "Will you be bridesmaid?"

Tiny nodded. "If it's a pretty dress."

"That's settled, then. You shall support the elderly bride, I'll be best man, and my mother shall be the rest of the affectionate relatives. Why, we can do it all in the family! No, though! who's to give her away? The best man can't, can he?"

"It doesn't sound quite proper. I wouldn't have the best man to give *me* away," said Tiny.

"Better have the best man to take you," Frank suggested. "Well, it's awkward, but for such a little amateur performance I think I might double the parts."

"Couldn't you manage a slight change of costume as you dodged from one side to the other?"

"Do not be so silly," said Mrs. Leicester. "And do remember that it is a secret—that nobody knows anything about this old love affair. It is quite a secret."

"You hear?" said Frank, turning his head a little, and looking down at Tiny.

"I don't see why you say 'You hear?' to me. I'm sure you're quite as bad, or worse," said the girl smartly.

"Oh, but it isn't that. I wasn't doubting your discretion or my own; but I thought you might have a few spare secrets about you, and not have known where to put them for safe keeping. I wanted you to observe that you might bring them here."

"Now, Frank, you know I always do keep secrets," said his mother. "I shall keep this one," she added virtuously. "I'm only afraid you and Tiny won't."

"I should keep it better, I think," said Tiny, "if I knew a little more about it. One is so apt to let out half a secret while one is hunting for the other half—don't you think so?" She laid her hand coaxingly on Mrs. Leicester's. "Do tell me. If nobody knows it, how do you know it?"

"My sister told me—my dear sister who is dead," Mrs.

Leicester replied, in a slightly altered voice. Tiny's brown eyes dilated for a moment, and the corners of her eager, smiling mouth went down a little. It was just the attention which any mention of the King of Terrors ordinarily receives in the course of conversation. "But there's hardly anything to tell," the elder lady went on; "Caroline knew something of young South when he was really little more than a lad, and he liked to talk to her about Miss Fairfax. It was quite a boy-and-girl attachment, you know; I don't think it was ever allowed to be a regular engagement; but Caroline used to tell me about it till I felt as if I knew him. She said it was quite touching to see how the young fellow worshipped the very ground Mildred Fairfax trod on. And then he got his commission, and was ordered off to India. Oh, it's a long while ago! I remember Caroline coming in to tell me that she had just said good-bye to him, poor boy."

"He went away," said Tiny. "Yes, but why didn't they marry afterwards?"

"Well, I don't know. After Caroline died, I never heard any more about them. But when Mildred Fairfax was four or five and twenty she married young Austin, and he was a friend of my husband's; so I saw something of her then, of course. We gave them a pair of candlesticks, pink and gold, very pretty; Mr. Leicester bought them in Paris. But I suppose they would be quite wrong now."

"Never mind, most likely they are broken," Frank suggested, in a consoling voice.

"It was Miss Fairfax who didn't wait for Mr. South, then?" said Tiny, pursuing the story. "And did he get married too?"

"Oh no! he never married. He wasn't in the army long; he sold out, and went to live with an uncle, who died some years ago, and left him a nice little property. No, he never married."

"Why didn't she wait for him? I shan't like her! Was Mr. Austin rich?"

"Pretty well, I think. He was a barrister, but he had money of his own. She is left very well off altogether. But I had quite lost sight of her for a long time, till we happened to meet at the Stauntons' place about a month ago, and I asked her to come and stay a few days. That's all."

"I shan't like her," Tiny repeated softly. "But you haven't accounted for Mr. South now," she persisted with pitiless interest.

"Oh, that was rather funny; it was at Mrs. Lane's—Minna Wilkinson she used to be. Some one happened to speak of Mr. Gilbert South, and I was curious. I asked to be introduced to him, and we had quite a long talk about poor Caroline and old times. Wasn't it odd I should meet him just after I had seen Mrs. Austin again? He mentioned her, and told me he used to know her, and began to ask so many questions that I invited him to come and meet her here. And, he jumped at it—quite jumped!" said Mrs. Leicester, sinking back.

"He is in love with her still," said Tiny pensively; "but she doesn't deserve it."

Frank settled his shoulders against the carved woodwork of the chimney-piece. "But how long ago is it since these young affections were blighted?" he inquired. "That's what I want to know."

Mrs. Leicester sat pondering the question. "I don't quite know," she said. "What year was it that young South went out to India? I could find out—I must have got it down somewhere, for it was just when you had the measles."

Frank uttered a very impatient ejaculation. "I wish to Heaven there was something you couldn't calculate in that



fashion!" he said. Then he began to laugh, and turned half-apologetically to Tiny: "Haven't you noticed? My ailments, whooping-cough and mumps, and that kind of thing——"

"Frank, you never had mumps! You are thinking of——"

"——have infected all history. In fact, nothing has happened *but* my ailments ever since I was born. Ask my mother."

Mrs. Leicester, who had risen to take her knitting from the table, laid her hand on his sleeve. "They haven't been very bad, luckily," she said, looking up at his handsome healthy face.

"If they had been, the world would have come to an end, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," she said, "it would—for me."

Frank bent his head and touched her smooth forehead with his lips. "For sentimental folly," he remarked, as he disengaged himself, "there is nothing like—like—women in general! Well, good-bye for the present."

"Where are you going?"

"Why, your superannuated lovers can't be here, either of them, for the next hour, and I promised Huntley I'd go and look at those cottages by the river they say ought to come down. It's a shame to spend such an afternoon indoors." He looked at Tiny. "Won't you come too? You haven't had a walk to-day."

"Not had a walk! Well, you were playing lawn-tennis for hours—I should like to know what you call that!" Mrs. Leicester exclaimed.

"I call it lawn-tennis," said Frank.

"It wasn't a walk," Tiny chimed in. "I'll get my hat; I should like to go." She was at the door in a moment, looking back with an eager, glowing little face as Mrs. Leicester called after her, "Mind you are not late coming home."

Frank Leicester was a fine young fellow, good-looking, good-hearted, good-tempered, and the owner of Culverdale Manor. Had he described himself he would have given that last clause the foremost place. He was intensely conscious of the fact that he was a landed proprietor, and family tradition had impressed him with the belief that Culverdale Manor, taking it altogether, was the most desirable spot on the surface of the globe. Any trifling drawbacks were honourably disposed of in the limitation "taking it altogether." Frank could not part himself in his own mind from the estate, which had belonged to the Leicesters for so many years. He was young Leicester of Culverdale, and if he had not been Leicester of Culverdale, he would hardly have known what he was or what he could be. It may be questioned whether it would have been possible to make provision for Frank anywhere else in the universe. It would certainly have been difficult. In his own house, on his own land, or in any company where there was the requisite knowledge of the importance of Culverdale, he was fearless, outspoken, and perhaps a little conceited, with the happy and harmless conceit of a young fellow who has been petted all his life, and thinks the world at once better and easier to deal with than most of us find it. But in any society where Culverdale counted for nothing he would have been shy and humble, with a very moderate opinion of his own abilities. Briefly, it may be said that Frank *was* Culverdale. It was a prosperous, well-managed, wealthy, and sheltered estate, beautiful after a certain trim and English ideal of beauty, but with nothing wild or original about it. It was just so much placid contentment lying in a ring fence. Frank was one with Culverdale when Culverdale was at its best, with the airy and hopeful freshness of spring about it and the beauty of promise in copse and meadow. Whether he would ever

be one with Culverdale when it was at its worst, an expanse of sodden and heavy acres lying drearily under a dull November sky, was a question which might suggest itself to a chance observer more readily than to those who knew and loved him as he was.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to say that Frank was essentially a country gentleman. There was a pleasant harmony between the young squire and his surroundings which would demand a pleasant word to describe it. It is true that he had travelled as much or more than his neighbours, making the most of a limited knowledge of that tongue which is neither English nor French, though it has affinities with both those languages. The fact that Culverdale was not much known on the Continent did not depress Frank. He was sorry for the natives of other lands (comprehensively described as "foreign beggars"), who, owing to misfortunes of birth and training, could not appreciate the position he held at home. As he felt himself unable to explain it with any degree of precision, he acquiesced in their ignorance with the good-humoured tolerance of a young prince in disguise. He had read his *Murray* in a good many historic localities, could find his way, with a sense of old acquaintance, through the streets of Paris, and would have been greatly surprised if any one had told him that he was more countrified than his second-cousin, Tiny Vivian, who had never crossed the Channel and had only enjoyed an occasional week in town. It was true, nevertheless. Tiny, with her bright innocent brown eyes and eager youthfulness, was so evidently undeveloped that it was impossible to classify her. The budding plant might open in the old garden where it had grown, or might be transferred to a conservatory to blossom more delicately there. But Frank had carried that slight rusticity of his to two or three European capitals, and brought it back to the

peaceful English home, where the rooks were cawing in the elms outside his windows, and the doves cooing in the tangled copses.

Mrs. Leicester went back to her easy-chair when Frank and Tiny had left her that afternoon, and gave herself up to drowsy meditation. "A matchmaker, indeed!" she said to herself, as she leaned back, suffering her knitting and her plump white hands to lie idly in her lap. "As if I shouldn't make a match for Frank, if I did for anybody! And no one can say I ever tried that." It was quite true. Mrs. Leicester had perceived that important young men were fatally apt to fall in love in a wrong, or, which was much the same thing, in an eccentric fashion, and she had determined that if Frank would but choose some one fairly unobjectionable she would ask no more. Hitherto, in spite of many little flirtations, he had escaped the snares laid for him at garden-parties and county balls, and had returned from all his wanderings apparently unscathed. So far as he showed any real preference it was for Tiny Vivian, who received his attentions in a very guileless and simple manner. It would be great promotion for Tiny to be mistress of the old Manor House, which was a paradise to her girlish fancy, but Frank's mother was quite ready to welcome her there, and was very good meanwhile in the matter of invitations. Mrs. Leicester was an amiable, kindly, easy-going woman, and was really fond of the girl, yet in her fierce motherly fondness she would have sacrificed her any day, body and soul, for Frank. Tiny must take care of herself. If Frank wanted her, well and good, but if the young prince should chance to discover a more suitable princess elsewhere, his little cousin must go back to her own people, heart-whole or heart-broken as she might chance to be.

Mrs. Leicester's thoughts turned from Frank and Tiny

to her expected visitors, and drifted idly in the past, to which they belonged. How well she remembered the dull autumn afternoon when Caroline came in to tell her that Gilbert South was gone, and how he had done his best to preserve a manly demeanour to the last. "Poor boy! poor boy! I only hope Mildred Fairfax will be true to him," said the kindly, sentimental Caroline, while her eyes filled at the thought of his sorrow. The sisters were excited over the love story, but naturally it failed to interest the fretful little tyrant who had the measles.\* Poor Aunt Carrie had to wipe her eyes and relate a wonderful story about soldiers who went away in ships, but who were all coming home again very soon. Mildred Fairfax was not required in Frank's version of the romance. Aunt Carrie told no more stories,—she was dead before the young lover reached India, and Mrs. Leicester, looking back across the long years which parted her from her favourite sister, felt a mournful pleasure in taking up the unfortunate love story of whose earliest beginning she had been the confidante. She had a vague feeling that it might please Carrie if she could give Gilbert South a chance of being happy after the fashion that Carrie had planned so long ago. It was a late and unsatisfactory conclusion, perhaps, yet the best that she could see, and there was a sentimental charm about it which appealed to Mrs. Leicester's easily touched feelings; so she sat in her easy-chair, thinking it all over, till the figures of the old story—Caroline, Gilbert South, and Mildred Austin—came and went in something of a confused and softened vision before her half-closed eyes, while the window near which she sat became a great sunset picture of darkly towering trees and yellow sky. The sound of wheels passed through her pleasant dream, which was hardly so much dispersed as a little more defined when Mr. South stood on the hearthrug where Frank had stood

a couple of hours earlier. He spoke in soft, deliberate tones, and looked round the room with a covert inquiry in his glance.

Mrs. Leicester made an effort, and was glad that he had had a pleasant drive. "You find me all alone," she said; "Frank is out somewhere, and so is Miss Vivian, who is staying with us. They were playing lawn-tennis all the morning, and they have been walking all the afternoon."

Mr. South expressed his admiration of such unflagging energy. "It wouldn't suit me," said Mrs. Leicester candidly; "but I have a sort of recollection that when I was young I used to think I would run about all my life."

"Ah, when one was young!" said Gilbert South, with a smile. "And so you are all alone?" he repeated, still looking round with questioning eyes.

Mrs. Leicester awoke to a sudden comprehension of her companion's anxiety. "I shouldn't have been alone long, even if you hadn't come," she said. "I am expecting Mrs. Austin—I told you she was coming, if you remember. She was obliged to put her visit off for a few days, and she arranged to come this very afternoon—in fact, I have sent to meet her."

"How does she come, then? By a later train? You need not have sent twice, Mrs. Leicester—I would have waited."

"Oh no, it's the other line. I am expecting her every minute. You have been running a race without knowing it, and you have won, you see. I thought she would have been here first. She has been with friends in Cornwall."

"In Cornwall!" Gilbert South repeated the words with a touch of startled interest in his voice. "She used to live in Cornwall—I was there one summer a long while ago. I wonder where she has been staying now?" And, after a moment, he added, "Not in the old house, I know."

"It's a beautiful county," said Mrs. Leicester. "Not pretty, like Devonshire, of course."

"No, not like Devonshire, but I like it better, perhaps because I knew it first. The Land's End on a still mid-summer day——" He stopped short in the middle of his speech, and looked down, but his silence was full of remembrance.

"Oh, delightful!" said Mrs. Leicester, fanning herself slowly with a Japanese fan. "Do I hear the carriage? No. Of all places I think the Land's End——" and she glided through two or three soft commonplace sentences.

"Yes," Gilbert interrupted her. "I beg your pardon, I mean I think you do hear——"

"Why, of course I do!" There was the sound of an arrival in the hall. Mrs. Leicester put down her fan, but the door at the far end of the room was thrown open before she could reach it, and "Mrs. Austin" was announced: "Here you are at last!" she exclaimed, hurrying to meet the newcomer.

Mrs. Austin bent her head to receive her friend's kiss of welcome, and the two came up the room with a soft rustle of drapery. The western sun lit up Mrs. Austin's pale face. "You know Mr. South?" said Mrs. Leicester, and with a smile she answered, "Oh yes," and put out a gloved hand. He was cool enough usually, but his heart beat fast, and he hardly knew what he said, as he stepped out of a long vista of shadowy years and a confusion of memories to greet Mrs. Austin, newly arrived from a Cornwall, whose sunsets, blue seas, and fringe of chafing white waves were those of a summer long gone by. It was only when she said, "Yes, it is a long while ago," that he remembered what his own remark had been.

At that same moment Tiny Vivian, a dainty little rustic figure, swinging a bunch of pale honeysuckle and green-

coated nuts, was crossing the corner of a distant field. She had gone some way in silence, with thoughts intent upon the romance awaiting her at the Manor House. It is true that to Tiny it was a dim and bygone affair, which had been laid by so long that it could have no better sweetness than that of dried rose-leaves and lavender, yet being a real romance it was interesting, and it was with an absorbed and earnest glance that she looked up at Frank and said, "I wonder how those two will meet. Don't you think she will feel rather strange?"

"Why she more than he?" demanded Frank. "I should think they would both feel rather queer after eighteen years." He aimed a blow at a thistle as he went by. "I've been thinking," he said with a laugh, "it must be eighteen years ago, if it isn't nineteen, since I had the measles. I was a horrid little spoilt wretch, I know—I remember crying because I couldn't go to a children's party—I used to wear a hideous tartan frock with frills, and had my hair curled. It is certainly eighteen years ago this autumn."

Tiny laughed too. "I suppose I was a baby—my birthday is in August, you know. Isn't it a long while ago? But if he has been waiting all these years, and been true all the while, he has nothing to be ashamed of."

"Might be ashamed of wasting his time, I should think," said Frank. "Don't bestow too much sympathy on Mr. South. And you expect Mrs. Austin to blush for her inconstancy? Not she! I'll bet you anything you like that the faithless widow is much the cooler of the two, and if there is any blushing when they meet, he'll have to do it."

"The sunset is doing it," said Tiny. "Look what a glow there is dying away behind those willows."

"We must look sharp," said Frank. He glanced at



his watch and quickened his pace. "You can walk a little faster?"

"Oh yes—are we far from home?" and without waiting for an answer Tiny went on. "I've made up my mind, I shan't like Mrs. Austin." There was a determined expression in her brown eyes as she spoke.

"Sorry for her," said young Leicester. "But, to tell you the truth, if it wasn't for pleasing my mother, I could very well dispense with the pair of them. I suppose he'll like some shooting; but I can't go out with him to-morrow—I've promised to ride over to Bridge End in the afternoon. I don't know what you'll all do, I'm sure—go for a drive, if you like."

Tiny pushed out a scornful little lower lip. "All packed in the carriage together!" Then, after a moment's consideration, "Well, we might go to the Castle."

"Isn't it rather reckless, using up our one show place the first day?" said Frank. "Though, to be sure, it isn't worth keeping—there's so very little of it."

"And don't you think it might harmonise nicely with their feelings?" Tiny continued, taking a higher range. "Won't they like to poke about little old remains of something that used to be very beautiful and splendid? I should think it would give them a chance of saying all sorts of things."

"Oh, go to the Castle—go to the Castle, by all means!" said Frank, laughing. "I only hope they'll have your fine sense of harmony, and make the most of the opportunity. Mind you don't interfere—that's all."

"I shall take care of your mother," Tiny answered loftily. "I shall carry her shawl. And I shall pick ivy-leaves off the wall. I hope I know my duty."

"Most people do," said Frank drily. "For instance, our duty is to be home in proper time to receive these good folks."

"Shan't we do it?" said the girl, a little apprehensively.

He shook his head. "No, like most people, we shan't! Can you dress in two minutes? You must try to-night, I'm afraid. It's all my fault; the time slipped away and I didn't notice." Tiny, in spite of her uneasiness, was very happy. They hurried on: the glow in the west grew fainter, and the rooks went by in great clouds, cawing their good-nights overhead.

"I can't think what possessed my mother to want these people!" said Frank, with a sudden outburst of irritation, as he helped Tiny over a stile. "I hate having to hurry you like this—you'll be tired out, thanks to them!"

"Oh, never mind me!" said Tiny, breathless but loyal.

"But I do mind you," Frank answered hotly. "I wish they were a thousand miles away! Anyhow their touching meeting must be over by now."

He was right, the meeting was over, and, as he had divined, Mrs. Austin had been the more unmoved of the two. While she shook hands with Gilbert South she did not cease to answer Mrs. Leicester's hospitably anxious questions. She was not tired—her train was rather late, yes, but she really was not tired—she would not have any tea—no, she would not have anything. Gilbert looked at her over the top of Mrs. Leicester's head. There was something of doubt, appeal, almost of entreaty in his glance, and Mrs. Austin did not seem to evade it, yet he hardly knew whether it had reached her or not. At that moment he felt it harder to realise how he had parted from Mildred Fairfax than it had been when he stood on the rug and listened through Mrs. Leicester's talk for the sound of approaching wheels. Mrs. Austin's softly modulated and unhurried speech was like and yet unlike Mildred's voice as he remembered it. It seemed like an echo of old days awakened in a strange place. She looked at him with

gently inquiring eyes, as if to discover how much he had changed since their parting, and she met the same mute questioning from him. Meanwhile Mrs. Leicester wondered aloud, with much discomposure, what Frank and Tiny could possibly have done with themselves. It was getting late: would Mrs. Austin like to go to her room? So the little party broke up, to meet again at seven.

The question which troubled Frank's mother was solved when, at three minutes to dinner-time, she met him on the stairs, looking very hot and dusty. She expressed some views on the subject of punctuality which seemed to make him hotter. "We went farther than I intended—we went along the river after I saw Huntley, and had to hurry back. What's the use of making a row about it?" he said rather crossly.

"You promised me you wouldn't be late!"

"Well, don't I tell you we hurried home? I believe Tiny nearly ran all the way. I wish I'd made her take it easy, if this is all the thanks we are to get." Frank had the disgusted look of a man who faces an ungrateful world.

"Where is Tiny?"

"Gone upstairs like a flash of lightning. Look here, mother, it wasn't her fault, you know."

"Well; all I can say is that it's very tiresome," said poor Mrs. Leicester. "Do make haste, Frank."

"I'm only waiting till you've done talking to me," Frank replied with boyish doggedness, and stood stock still with his hands in his pockets. Mrs. Leicester uttered an impatient exclamation, and flounced down to the drawing-room, whereupon Frank went up the stairs two at a time, narrowly escaping a meeting with a very cool and carefully-dressed gentleman who was just coming from his room. He made the most of his time, but it was a heavy-browed and rather sullen young host who made his appearance

some minutes after dinner was announced, and offered his arm to Mrs. Austin with a muttered apology. Frank was profoundly dissatisfied with his guests and himself. People who were busy with their love affairs while he was a tiresome little boy getting over the measles belonged altogether to a peculiarly uninteresting past, and the consciousness that he had been wanting in politeness made him angrily uneasy. He made up his mind about Mrs. Austin and Mr. South between his spoonfuls of soup. There was a slight likeness between them at the first glance. It was hardly enough to suggest the idea of brother and sister, but they might have been cousins. They were both tall, fair, and pale; they were very quiet, and when they spoke it was with a subdued clearness of tone, and with a little more finish than Frank himself. The resemblance made them still more uninteresting, and the soft voices struck him as slightly affected. So far as they were concerned, he saw precisely the pair of faded lovers he was prepared to see, but he noticed that Tiny, whose cheeks were a little flushed, and whose pulses were a little quickened by their haste and her fear of his mother's displeasure, looked peculiarly vivid and young by the side of the newcomers. There was something happy and eager in her utterance of the most commonplace remarks, which Frank had not observed before. Cross though he was, he flashed an occasional glance of sympathy and encouragement to his fellow-culprit when he chanced to encounter her bright timid eyes. He would not have Tiny scolded for that afternoon's misconduct, and he watched his mother's manner so jealously that when Mrs. Austin said something about Culverdale, and the road by which she had come, he was preoccupied, and answered rather at random. She turned away with a hardly perceptible smile, and spoke to Gilbert South.

It was a little better when the ladies left the dining-room, for Frank contrived to exchange a smile of reconciliation with his mother as he held the door, and so went back to his duty with a somewhat brighter face. But it was not much better. These people were not to his taste. They had the air of having seen and known things beyond the range of Culverdale society, and Frank felt shy, young, and half-defiant as he sat over his wine with Gilbert South. He suspected his guest of possibly laughing at his youth and awkwardness. It is true that there was nothing in Mr. South's manner to justify the suspicion. He did not look like a man who was in the habit of laughing at his neighbours; but Frank was in an unreasonable mood that evening. He held himself aloof when they went into the drawing-room, still with that heavy consciousness of inhospitable manners upon him, and suffered Mr. South to ask Tiny to sing, and to go to the piano, talk over the songs, and turn the pages for her, while he sat by the table, holding a paper which he did not read.

And then in a moment all was changed—Frank himself—the whole world. Mrs. Austin rose from her seat by Mrs. Leicester, came out of the shadows into the mellow lamplight, and walked to the piano. She simply crossed the room, with the light shining on her pale, beautiful face, as if she were drawn softly by the music. She was utterly unconscious of Frank, who lifted his head from his hand and sat gazing at her, astonished and spellbound, seeing her for the first time. He had been too sulky and absorbed to pay any attention before; he had had her hand on his arm—fool that he was!—and had taken no heed. Now as she went by it was like a wonderful revelation, and with a perception which to his own consciousness was singularly quickened; he noted every detail of the picture—the delicate features, the soft fine hair, the shadowy eyelids, the lips

parted a little in a lingering smile, the hand that drooped and held a fan, the dusky softness of her trailing velvet gown, and the web of yellowish lace at her throat, with a white spark of diamond light in it. It was not such beauty as Frank had ever taken pleasure in, or even recognised, before, and for that very reason he was unable to set any limit to his admiration. The charm was that of a pale gleam in an unknown sky, revealing a new world. He was startled at the sudden rush of feeling which carried him out of the narrow boundaries within which he had been eating, drinking, and sleeping till that moment. It seemed to him as if none of the thoughts and words to which he had been accustomed in that earlier life would serve him now. He had scorned poetry as something foolish and unreal; but it struck him that if he took up a volume of poetry he might chance to find it all coming true. Something wonderful, inexplicable, unforeseen, had befallen him in that brief minute; but the important events of life may very well happen in a minute which often goes unrecognised. Frank, however, recognised his as it went by.

He moved a little as he sat, to command a better view of the room, and saw how South, who was stooping to untie a portfolio of Tiny's, rose with a swift glance of welcome as Mrs. Austin approached, and silently gave her a chair. She laid her hand on the back, but paused, listening. Looking eagerly at the two as they stood side by side, Frank forgot that he had ever seen a resemblance between them, and would have taken it as an insult if any one had suggested that such a resemblance existed. The secret love story, over which he had laughed that afternoon, rose up terribly before his eyes. He remembered every word he had said, how he had proposed to give them their wedding-breakfast, and how he had joked with Tiny about the elderly bride. He hated himself as he recalled the

word. Of course, it had been nothing but a joke ; Frank knew well enough that a woman who was a girl eighteen years earlier was not elderly ; but still he had used it, and the blood rushed to his forehead at the recollection. It was such a detestable word, hard, prosaic, and commonplace ; it seemed to vulgarise and spoil whatever it touched. Frank would readily have sacrificed a year of his life (which at his age means that he would have consented to be a year younger) could he have unsaid that hateful word "elderly." His meditations speedily became so unendurable that, in sheer despair, he got up and went towards the piano. Anything was better than sitting there alone, with an idiotic paper in his hand, which would not distract his attention for a moment, and his thoughts full of the remembrance that he had made fun of Mrs. Austin.

It was with a singular sensation of being at once very dull and clumsy and curiously keen-sighted that he approached his guests. For the first time in his life he understood that real life could be dramatic, since hitherto he had supposed that novels and plays were interesting simply because of their unreality. To say that a thing was like a play meant that it was unlike anything which would really happen to a sensible Englishman. He had not sufficient imagination to enter into the feelings of the people who came and went about him. Long habit might teach him something of their likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, but he had little or no instinct in such matters, and consequently saw nothing beneath the everyday aspect of life. That night, however, his mother's reminiscences had given him a clue to the deeper meaning of what was passing under his roof, and with that secret knowledge of Mrs. Austin and Mr. South he grasped the situation as if it were on the stage. He saw it as if it were on the stage, but he knew that he was more than a spectator.

Tiny was singing, and Frank halted a little way off, as if to listen. He had never felt so shy and ill at ease in all his life; never felt so little at home as he did standing there in the Manor House drawing-room, in the very heart of his kingdom. Of course, he knew well enough that he was the master of Culverdale, but he did not see that Culverdale had anything to do with this matter. In fact, for the first time in his life, he was profoundly dissatisfied with Culverdale; it was a hole of a place to live in—it had no capabilities. How should they amuse Mrs. Austin? She had been everywhere, she would be bored, she would laugh at it. It was all very well for Tiny, but Mrs. Austin was very different. They might have company, might “call the neighbours in,” as the old nursery rhyme has it; but all the neighbours were bores. Frank had not discovered the fact before, but he perceived it now in the light of Mrs. Austin’s presence, and reflected that a dinner party of twenty-bore-power would not mend matters much.

Tiny’s song came to an end, and Frank awoke to the consciousness that he was looking straight at Mrs. Austin in his perplexity.

“Something makes you very grave, Mr. Leicester,” she said, with a slight smile.

“I—I was thinking.” And Frank fairly stammered over this brilliant reply.

“So deeply that it was a shame to interrupt you.”

“No, no, not at all. In fact I was thinking—I was afraid you would find this place very stupid—I was wondering what we could do that you would like.”

“You were thinking about *that*?” Mrs. Austin, who had thought Frank very boyish and sulky at dinner, looked up at him now with sudden interest. She was surprised and a little touched, for there was no mistaking Frank’s sincerity. “But, Mr. Leicester,” she said, “there is no



occasion for this terrible anxiety. I assure you I'm not a difficult person to amuse. What made you think I was?"

"No; I didn't think it," said Frank. "But if there is nothing at all, how then?"

"Come, it isn't so bad as that. There must be some walks, for instance."

"Oh, well, yes, there are some walks," Frank admitted rather grudgingly. "I didn't know whether you would care for walks."

"Yes, in moderation. Not what you call walking, I daresay. And drives?"

"Yes," he said, "you can drive as much as ever you like; only I don't exactly know what there is to drive to."

"You are not encouraging," said Mrs. Austin with a little laugh.

"There *is* a ruin," said Frank. "Tiny and I were thinking that perhaps you would like to go to-morrow afternoon, if it is fine. But it is nothing of a place," he continued, fixing his brown eyes despondently on the floor, as if he saw the whole thing in the compass of an Indian rug.

"Ruined too much, or not ruined enough?" she inquired.

"Oh, ruined quite enough—too much if anything."

"I like a neglected ruin; I hate restorations. I am sure I shall like to see this one," said Mrs. Austin graciously. "And what is this building, or rather, what was it?"

"Well," Frank replied, "it's a bit of a little tower—Culverdale Castle some people call it." (He had invariably called it so himself till that evening.) "Perhaps," he added with a fine irony, for he was growing more fluent, "it might have been the fashion to have your castles small when this one was built; or perhaps it wasn't quite full-grown when it began to fall to pieces—I don't know. But

Culverdale *Castle*—O Lord!" Frank's tone, as he spoke of his little ruin, conveyed contemptuous disgust, as if it were no more than a decayed tooth.

Mrs. Austin slowly turned a ring on her finger. "I don't know that I'm so very particular about the size of my ruins," she said; "some people are, I believe. I remember going once to see the remains of a Roman villa with some friends. I think they expected to find it standing up with a knocker on the door, and they were very much disappointed; in fact, they said it was a swindle. I won't say your ruin is a swindle, Mr. Leicester, especially after all your warnings."

"You may if you like," said Frank gloomily. "I think myself a thing ought to be a decent size. What did you say just now, that you didn't like 'em restored?"

"No, I don't. Why? Has this been restored?"

He shook his head. "It's all right, then. I only thought that if you would have liked a little more of it, I might have gone over to-morrow with a hod of mortar and a barrow-load of stones, and done it up for you. Only then you couldn't have driven there till Saturday."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Austin, smiling, "I think I would rather go to-morrow, and see it as it is."

"Well—only you won't expect anything, will you?"

"No, I won't. Do you always depreciate Culverdale and everything belonging to it in this fashion?"

The point-blank question, asked in the quietest of tones, was not easy to answer. "I don't know; not particularly," said the disingenuous young man. "It does well enough for me, you know."

"I suspect it would do well enough for a good many people," Mrs. Austin replied. "That was rather a pretty road I came by from the station this afternoon—you shall not run everything down so unmercifully." Frank coloured

with pleasure to hear her defending Culverdale. He felt as if she were taking his part against himself. "And, by the way," she went on, "there is one thing I want to see which you do not propose to show me, apparently."

Frank emerged from the depth of his despair. "What is that? Tell me."

"Why," said Mrs. Austin, "I want you to show me over your house. I am sure you have all manner of delightful old things stored away here. I caught sight of a lovely old carved cupboard at the top of the stairs, as I came down, which looked as if it ought to be a perfect mine of wealth."

"What sort of old things?" Frank inquired anxiously. "Old china, do you mean, and pictures, and old work—do you care for them?"

"Why, yes; don't we all care for them nowadays?" said Mrs. Austin, with something which, though hardly so much as a smile, was like soft sunshine while she spoke. "I'm not conspicuously behind the age, Mr. Leicester—I'm very like other people."

"That I don't believe," muttered Frank under his breath. It was doubtful whether his companion caught the words or not. Her eyes rested on him with a faintly inquiring expression, and he went on hurriedly, "Let me show you, then. You shall see all that there is."

"That will be very good of you. I should like it very much. I suppose you know everything in the house by heart?" said Mrs. Austin, furling and unfurling her fan, and looking up kindly at Frank.

"All those things? No, indeed I don't," the young man answered, half-laughing and half-confused. "I know there are a lot of old pictures and heirlooms about the place. I've always been meaning to learn all about them, but I never have. But I'll find out," he added courageously.

"It doesn't sound as if you would be a very trustworthy guide."

"Oh, try me first!" he exclaimed. "Then when you have exhausted my stock of information you can have somebody else who knows more; and then——"

"And then?" she repeated when he paused.

"Why," said Frank, blushing like a shy schoolboy, "then I think you had better teach me."

Mrs. Austin looked at him smilingly. "It would only be common gratitude, would it?" she said.

"It is a bargain, then," he urged. "But when? Candle-light isn't any good, you know. Will to-morrow morning do?"

She answered that to-morrow morning would suit her perfectly, and looked past Frank in a way that made him turn and discover Mr. Gilbert South at his elbow, smiling agreeably, and holding a piece of music. He promptly announced the nature of his errand.

"Miss Vivian has sent me to ask if you will sing this with her."

Frank hesitated, looking at the song, at Mr. South, at Tiny, who from her music-stool surveyed the scene, and waited the result of her embassy.

"Pray do," said Mrs. Austin. "Especially as I see that Miss Vivian has chosen a song which happens to be a favourite of mine."

"All right," said Frank, and taking it from Mr. South, he went to the piano. He had had his back to Tiny during his talk, and now that he walked towards her it was with a clouded face. He had suddenly recollected that there was no occasion for *him* to amuse Mrs. Austin. South had been invited on purpose to do that. "I daresay she was wishing for him all the time!" thought Frank, with a bitter throb of jealousy. "Well, I don't

care ; I'll show her the house to-morrow. It's my house—it's all I have, and I will have that, at any rate ! And he shan't come with us either ; the others can take him round, if they like."

"Aren't you very grateful?" said Tiny, in a whisper, looking up at him with a sunny little face, and arching her delicate brows as if to point the question. "I saw how good you were, and I knew how you must hate it."

"Your eyes are very sharp," Frank replied.

She nodded. "Oh, but it wasn't only then," she said, setting up the music before her, and flattening the page with a touch of her soft little brown hand. "I looked at you at dinner-time, and I saw you didn't like her. I can always tell whether you like people or not."

"Can you? What do you think if I behave to anybody just as I do to you?"

"I shall not answer that question," said Tiny firmly. "You seem to have forgotten that we are never to talk about anybody but people in general, and you didn't behave to her just as you do to me, so that has nothing whatever to do with it. Do you know, I think I have had the best of it this evening? I said I shouldn't like her, and I don't ; but he is rather nice."

"Rather nice, is he?"

"Yes," Tiny answered, "he is. Now are you ready?"

Mrs. Austin, listening to her young friend's performance, decided that he had a pleasant voice, sadly in want of a little training. "Do you sing now?" she asked Gilbert South.

The "now" marked a remembrance that he sang of old. "Not to-night," he answered hastily ; "to-morrow, perhaps."

"Dear me ! Everything seems to be for to-morrow," said Mrs. Austin, leaning back in her chair and looking down.

"I should rather have said that everything had been yesterday," South answered in a low voice.

"To-day comes off badly either way," she rejoined lightly, but without raising her eyes. "It generally does, I think."

He fancied there was a touch of mockery in her tone, but he could not be sure. "Do not say anything against to-day," he said; "I have looked forward to it for a long while."

"Ah, then you are sure to be disappointed!"

"Am I disappointed?" said Gilbert. "That is what I want to know." He turned quickly to the piano. "Thank you; that is a charming song." He went back to Tiny Vivian, while Mrs Austin, softly murmuring her thanks, rose and returned to Mrs. Leicester, who roused herself from a state of drowsy contentment to entertain her.

Frank had no further opportunity that evening. Perhaps had one presented itself he would hardly have taken advantage of it. When the party separated for the night he lingered at the door, and caught a glimpse of Mrs. Austin going up the shallow steps of polished oak, and that moment taught him that his old staircase was a fitting background for a picture. Coming back, he took up his accustomed position on the hearthrug, so absorbed in his own thoughts that he seemed almost sullen. He was glad that Mr. South was tired, and would not stay to smoke and talk. He bade Tiny a brief good-night; he stood looking heavily at his mother as she wandered about the room, gathering up her scattered possessions.

"You don't like these people, do you?" she said.

Frank muttered something to the effect that South was well enough.

"No, but you don't like them. I didn't much suppose you would; but I thought you wouldn't mind for once. We don't often have anybody you don't like."

"All right," said Frank. "I didn't complain, did I?"

"No; and it was very nice of you to go and talk to Mildred Austin this evening. You did go and talk to her? I didn't dream it, surely? I was half-asleep, I think."

"Yes; I talked to her."

"And you know it is only for poor Carrie's sake—just a fancy of mine. It won't be for long, Frank."

"No," said Frank, "I don't at all suppose it will be for long."

"Mildred was always considered very good-looking," Mrs. Leicester remarked in a musing tone, standing still with a work-basket in her hand. "Of course, she has gone off a good deal—though really not so much as one might have expected—since I first knew her. But I know she isn't your style of beauty, even if she were not elderly, as you and Tiny were saying this afternoon. Oh, you young folks!" And Mrs. Leicester ended her sentence with a good-humoured chuckle of reminiscence.

There was a pause before Frank opened his lips. Since the time was just long enough to permit of making an appeal to high Heaven, it may be hoped that it was so employed. "I'm sure I never said she was my style," he answered, and added in a lower voice, "I know very well she isn't!" And with that he turned on his heel and went away to bed.

It was evident that young Leicester might dream his new dream with little fear of discovery, unless Gilbert South should detect his secret. Mrs. Leicester and Tiny Vivian had both perceived that Frank did not like Mrs. Austin. Tiny, being keener-sighted than the elder lady, might possibly reconsider the matter; but such a conviction is not lightly set aside. Life is long enough for many changes; but it is not long enough to allow of our recognising many changes in our friends. Having once settled what they

must be (which is easily done, since there is but one really complicated human being in the world), it is obviously necessary that they should always be what we have determined they are. How otherwise could we go through life with any feeling of security? It would be little less intolerable than if the hills and valleys, fields and highroads around us, should shift about and journey in different directions, under a sky whose stars were playing hide-and-seek with the astronomers.



## II

IF Frank had discovered Mrs. Austin's supreme loveliness and charm in the soft lights and shadows of the evening, it was appropriately reserved for Mrs. Austin to perceive that the morning was the time which best suited her young host. If Mr. South, and perhaps Mrs. Austin herself, should chance to be a little pale and languid, a little conscious of a shadowy past,

"Clouding o'er the new-born day  
With regrets of yester-morn,"

a little disinclined to recommence the monotonous journey from dawn to dusk, which after all seemed to lead to nothing very splendid, one would have said that Frank Leicester was alive and glad with all the life and gladness of the newly-wakened world. He was not in the breakfast-room when Mrs. Austin came down, but, before she had well answered Mrs. Leicester's questions about her night's rest, she heard that he had been out and about for a couple of hours. "He was here a minute or two ago," said Tiny Vivian, herself a radiant, bright-eyed, early riser, "he will be back directly. He only went into the garden." And as the words were uttered Mrs. Austin looked out, and saw Frank emerging from an opening in the tall yew hedge which bounded the view on one side, and coming up the path, with the sunshine glistening on the short waves of his

brown hair, and his dog leaping at his lifted hand. If there was a touch of something rustic about Frank, it was an un-mixed charm just then, as he opened the glass door and stepped in, fresh as if he had been steeped to the heart in the air and sunshine of "the country green." He brought a breath of the sweet morning with him, telling how he had brushed through leafy ways and looked across his level meadows before his guests were ready to lift their tired heads from their pillows. He had gone to bed with a heavy heart, but he came forward now, happy and hopeful in spite of himself, and prodigiously hungry.

Breakfast over, Mrs. Leicester excused herself on the plea of orders to give to the housekeeper. "That means an hour's gossip," said Frank to a family portrait.

"It means your dinner, you ungrateful boy," Mrs. Leicester replied as she opened the door.

There was a brief silence after her departure. The four who remained, and whose duty it was to amuse and to be amused, seemed a little uncertain how to set about it. Tiny was the first to make an effort. A suggestive remark, aimed at Mr. South, brought him to her side where she stood at the window; a dialogue on gardens followed as naturally as possible, and in less than five minutes the pair were setting out to study the example which lay before them, basking in the yellow September sunshine. Mrs. Austin, meanwhile, was glancing over the *Times*, and young Leicester, as he leaned against the chimney-piece, pencilled figures on the back of an envelope, and added or subtracted in a curiously haphazard fashion. He never once looked at Mr. South and Tiny, and Tiny was apparently unconscious that Mrs. Austin and he were still alive. When the couple were fairly gone, and the sound of their footsteps and voices had died away, Frank drew a long breath, glanced at his bit of paper as if he did not think much of arithmetic

in general, tore it across, and stood waiting his companion's pleasure, and reflecting on the advantages of early rising.

While Mrs. Austin was yet half-asleep, Frank and Tiny had held a consultation on the lawn, under the tulip trees. Starting from the ascertained fact of his dislike to the strangers, it struck Tiny as very nice of him to say that he would show Mrs. Austin round the house after breakfast. But, knowing that even Frank was mortal, she was not surprised that he set a limit to his self-sacrifice. "Look here, Tiny, I can't stand both of them," he had said. "You'll have to take your friend South away somewhere. You like him best, you say—well, I don't. Besides, I expect I shall have enough of him to-morrow. Take him round the grounds, can't you?" And when Tiny hazarded a smiling reference to the story they had heard the day before, he stopped her rather abruptly. "Oh, let my mother mind her own matchmaking—it's no concern of ours. We've only got to keep the secret. And don't you see, Tiny, it would look very queer if you and I walked off and left them to themselves?" Tiny saw that. "They'll have time enough and to spare," said Frank finally.

"So they will," she assented. "This afternoon, when you are out of the way."

"Yes," said Frank, gazing intently at a weed in the turf, "they'll have this afternoon." And so it happened that, while the afternoon was reserved for Gilbert South, Frank had the morning.

"Are you inclined to have a look round the place?" he inquired in a meek voice when Mrs. Austin seemed to have finished the *Times*. He waited for her answer with some anxiety. Suppose she should have changed her mind, or forgotten all about it! Experience, it is true, had taught him that women were flatteringly compliant when they had to deal with the young owner of Culverdale Manor.

Frank's propositions were invariably applauded by his feminine listeners, and he knew very well that if he were to suggest to any girl in the neighbourhood that they should ascend Mount Everest together, she would say it was a delightful idea, and would take his arm to start off that moment. Frank had never found women capricious. Though he was as ready as any other man to say *Souvent femme varie*, in point of fact, in his little flirtations, it was always Mr. Francis Leicester who changed very quickly, and the girl who showed an unnecessary and sometimes reproachful constancy. According to experience, Frank should have had no misgivings when he reminded Mrs. Austin of her promise. But he instinctively felt that his experience was not likely to be of much service to him on this occasion. "You said you should like it—there isn't much to show you, but will you come?" he asked with simple directness.

Mrs. Austin looked up a little absently. Their talk of the evening before had not made a deep impression on her, and she had almost made up her mind to spend the morning in writing letters. When Frank spoke she had just reckoned up the most tiresome of her correspondents, and had decided that she might hope to possess an easy conscience by luncheon-time. But as she met his eyes she remembered his anxiety to amuse her, and checked the answer which was on her lips. He was a nice hospitable boy, this son of Fanny Leicester's, and if he wanted to do the honours of his home he should have his way. Her letters could wait, and she would see Frank's old china in the morning and his little ruin in the afternoon.

"Will I come?" she repeated. "Of course I will come. I shall be delighted." And she rose instantly, with a sweet readiness which filled Frank's soul with a tumult of delight.

It was speedily obvious that the young man knew very

little about the things he had undertaken to show. He was vaguely proud of his heirlooms because they were heirlooms. It pleased him to think that he inherited as a matter of course what other people were so anxious to buy. His old oak had been carved for the Manor House, his old cups and dishes had belonged to generations of dead and gone Leicesters. That was enough for him. He remembered the names of a few of the portraits, and in one or two notable cases could even tell the artist, but his remarks as a rule were not instructive. "Oh, I recollect that one," he would say, with a glance of recognition, "used to hang in the little room out of the gallery upstairs," or it might be, "Do you see that queer old fellow up there? I remember I was awfully afraid of him when I was a little chap; I thought he walked." Sometimes he confined himself to a simple expression of opinion. "That's a comical get-up—doesn't she look as if she'd got a duster and a feather on her head? Do you suppose that's a cap, now, or a hat?" But, curiously enough, his ignorance did not affect Mrs. Austin unpleasantly. She did not feel as if Frank were an outsider, but rather as if the connection between him and the people on the walls was close enough to justify a disregard of mere book-knowledge about them. She could have learned more names and dates in a couple of days than Frank had acquired in his life, but he claimed kindred with the portraits in the very look and attitude with which he confronted them. There was a young squire of more than a century earlier who might have been his brother. Mrs. Austin called his attention to the likeness, and Frank, with his handsome head thrown back, stood gazing at him in a glow of suddenly-awakened friendliness. "I wonder who he was?" she said. "Suppose he turned out to be a namesake of yours?"

"I'm sure I don't know," the young fellow answered

"Is he really like me?" And without waiting for her reply he went on, "I'm idiotically ignorant."

"Don't call yourself names," said Mrs. Austin. "You certainly are ignorant, and it is very disgraceful, but I rather like it. People who know too much won't let one make any discoveries or imagine anything on one's own account. Now you leave me quite free in that respect."

Frank smiled somewhat ruefully. "If that is all you want, I am perfect."

They went upstairs, and there he had rather an easier part to play, as she could appreciate what she saw without his explanation. He was eager to fit keys into locks for her, and would readily have broken open any obstinate door which resisted his efforts. Certainly, if the future was to be for Gilbert South, the present time was Frank's, and he made good use of it, for before that journey of discovery was over, the house was peopled with beautiful memories. There was Mrs. Austin pausing at the top of the stairs, and smiling at a grotesque head which grinned from the door of an old cabinet—Mrs. Austin intent on a dingy bit of tapestry, and triumphantly discovering Rebekah at the well—Mrs. Austin laughingly putting him aside when he failed to unlock a great oak chest, and turning the key with her slim white fingers—Mrs. Austin looking out from an oriel window across the sunlit oaks and chestnuts of the park with a tranquil far-seeing gaze. There was more to remember of this, for in the act of turning away she stopped short, "Oh, there's some beautiful old china," she said, "I must have a look at that! Don't you care for these things, really, Mr. Leicester?"

"No—I don't know—I mean Yes," said Frank. "Don't you think they are women's things?"

"Women's things? Don't be so scornful," said Mrs. Austin, with her quiet smile.

"That isn't scornful," he answered slowly. "I meant——" He paused and looked at her, at the brown oak panelling behind her head, at the blue and white china, at her lifted hand as she put back a cup. The sunshine, slipping through the leaves which wavered outside, brightened the picture with capricious touches of gold.

"Well—you meant? I am waiting."

"Why," said Frank, "what good are these things to me? I don't understand 'em, you know. I can read the papers and go over my bailiff's accounts just as well without two blue plates and an old teapot in front of me. But when you stand there it's different—they seem to be all right somehow."

Mrs. Austin met his gaze with a little touch of laughter just at the corners of her mouth. "Upon my word!" she said, "I didn't know that I was in such perfect harmony with an old teapot. Well, it is something, no doubt, to be able to adorn the leisure moments of life—when the bailiff is away!" Frank would have protested, but she checked him with a quick little movement of her head. "Are you going to explain yourself? Don't—an explanation is enough to spoil the most beautiful thing that ever was said, and to make the worst worse. Besides, there is no need."

"No," he answered with a laugh, "I don't suppose there is."

Mrs. Austin ended by enjoying her morning in a very bright simple fashion, and feeling a little as if she and Frank were a couple of children engaged in some delightful piece of mischief. Frank had certainly hampered a lock, broken a little saucer, lost one key on the floor of a dark cupboard, and mixed up the remainder in hopeless confusion. He knew there were some queer old dresses somewhere, he remembered having seen them as a boy,

and in the search for them he took Mrs. Austin into all sorts of shadowy corners, and made interesting discoveries of old brooms and brushes and dusty books. On one shelf he found some toys, shabby with ill-usage and long neglect. He stood looking at these for a moment, bewildered to find that he had forgotten them so utterly and remembered them so well. He stooped to touch a little painted water-cart, and then shut them all into the darkness again with a lingering smile. At last he came upon the old brocades and laces of which he was in search, and looked anxiously to see whether they would please his companion. "Are they right?" he said, "or don't you care for them?" As soon as he was satisfied on this point, he would have tossed them all over the floor for her inspection, if she had permitted it. "Look like private theatricals, don't they?" he said when he was bidden to stand on one side.

"Oh, isn't this lovely?" she exclaimed, without heeding his question.

He considered the pale delicately-flowered silk with a puzzled face. "Lovely? Isn't it rather queer and—and—washy?" he said at last.

"Oh, that won't do at all!" Mrs. Austin replied, smiling up at him. "That isn't what we say about such things nowadays. We must educate you."

"Well," said Frank, with a flash of inspiration; "I think I should know better if I saw it on." Mrs. Austin shook it out daintily to let the light fall on it, and he looked from the silk to her face, and back again. All at once he seemed to see what she would look like in it; a tall slight figure in the quaint old gown. "Yes," he said, with sudden conviction, "I see now. It's beautiful."

"You are a promising scholar," she replied. "What were you saying about theatricals just now? But these



things are too good for *theatricals*—too real for such little candle-light shams.”

“Not a bit too good—if you would act!”

She shook her head. “Not even to wear this dress! Though that would be delightful.”

“Do,” said Frank. “Why not? I’d get myself up like my friend downstairs—the man over the library chimney-piece, you know. Would that be right with this of yours?”

It was Mrs. Austin’s turn to call up a picture, and she raised her eyes to his face. “Oh yes, I think so. We should be in the same half-century at any rate, quite near enough for private *theatricals*.”

“Oh, I say!” Frank exclaimed. “Half a century!”

“Well, I admit it would be an awkward interval in real life,” said Mrs. Austin, smiling. “But I think it might do on the stage.”

“Let’s try it,” said Frank, with his face aglow.

“No,” she answered very gently and decidedly. “Why not ask Miss Vivian?”

“Tiny!” The suggestion called him out of an enchanted world into his everyday existence, and he had to check himself lest he should say something ungracious.

“She would look charming in some of these things,” said Mrs. Austin thoughtfully.

“I daresay she would—I mean, I’m sure she would. Well, we can think of that—any time.”

“And do you think we can join the others—any time?” his companion inquired. “I should say we had better bring our investigations to an end and look for them. Your mother will think we are lost.”

Frank attempted no remonstrance; and she laid everything back in its place with a charming dexterity, only pausing once to look at some old lace. He watched her,

still with the shadow on his face which had come when that mention of Tiny's name reminded him of more than Tiny.

They went downstairs, but could find no one. "My mother is having more than an hour's gossip to-day," said Frank. He turned to a side window and looked out. "And the others are playing lawn-tennis."

Mrs. Austin provided herself with a parasol, and they went across the lawn to find the players. Tiny Vivian had enjoyed her morning very well, though she had been conscious that Frank and Mrs. Austin were a long while going round the house. She had not, however, got beyond the feeling that it was very good of Frank, and she came to meet the pair with a bright face of welcome. "Coming to play?" she said gaily.

"All right," said Frank; and he turned to his companion, "you will, won't you?"

Mrs. Austin shook her head. "No—I can't play. No—don't offer to teach me—it's very kind of you, but I'm too old to begin now."

If he were disappointed it was only for a moment, for in a moment he felt that he would rather not see Mrs. Austin rushing about after balls, eager, excited, flushed. Tiny might, of course, but not Mrs. Austin. "It isn't that!" he said, in answer to her smiling refusal. "You could learn anything you liked, but you are quite right—it would not be worth your learning." And he went away with long steps to fetch her a chair. When he came back, Gilbert South was describing something to Tiny in his soft voice, and Mrs. Austin stood a little apart, studying the old house with tranquil eyes.

Frank brought the chair, and an Indian shawl of his mother's which he had picked up in the hall. "Will you have this on?" he said. "No? Then I'll put it over the

chair. It's a very ugly chair." Frank had never been in the habit of eyeing his furniture so discontentedly.

"It's very comfortable," said Mrs. Austin, giving a touch to his arrangement of the drapery which seemed to make it exactly right. "Now I won't keep you from your game."

"Look here, Frank," said Tiny, lightly touching his arm with her little sunburnt fingers; "leave me out this time. You play with Mr. South."

"No, no, Miss Vivian, that won't do," Gilbert protested. "You've been describing Mr. Leicester as a champion player, and I'm not going to be pitted against him for you to laugh at my clumsiness."

"You're not clumsy," Tiny replied, quite simply.

"Thank you," said South, with a little bow. "But I'm a beginner, you know, and you have undertaken my education. Suppose you let me learn a little by looking on."

"Come then, Tiny," said Frank. After all he had had his turn. It was only fair play to make way for the rival who was also his guest.

Gilbert strolled across to where Mrs. Austin sat, and threw himself on the grass at her feet. "Upon my word," he said, "I'm not sorry to rest a little. I've taken a good deal of exercise this morning!"

Mrs. Austin smiled, and watched the game, though she did not understand it sufficiently to appreciate Frank's skill. She was interested in the two agile figures merely as a picture—a pretty picture in the autumn sunshine. Gilbert, at her feet, leaning on his elbow, seemed as if he also were watching the two figures, but in reality his eyes were fixed upon a third, a tall slender girl, fair, graceful, swift, playing battledore and shuttlecock in the stillness of a summer evening, close by an old red-brick wall on which peaches

were trained. Above the wall a thin rank of trees rose against a clear sky. There was an arch over the garden path, a tangle of climbing roses, delicate leaf-sprays, and clusters of loose white flowers, under which the girl would go when the game was over and the sun gone down. And beyond the buttressed wall, where the elm boughs were stirring in the cool evening air, was the great world, beginning at the ivy-grown garden gate and stretching away to unknown distances. To India, for instance, which lay waiting for a young fellow who was to do the most remarkable things. It was wonderful only to think of the sights he was to see, the strange faces, the strange skies, before he came home bronzed and bearded, to stroll once more along the grassy walks and find the clustered roses of a later year hanging white in the twilight. As he left the garden for the last time that home-coming had been almost as vivid and real as the tender pain of parting. Afterwards it faded away into a dim picture, sad as such pictures are when what was to have become an actual future is put aside and marked, "It might have been." But now while he lay on the turf, watching Tiny and Frank, it rose up before his eyes as clearly outlined as of old.

It could never be. The heads of the household were dead, the old home was broken up, the house was sold. Gilbert had a vague remembrance of having been told that a retired tradesman, who piqued himself on growing big pine-apples, had taken the place and improved it immensely. However long his life might last, it could never hold that happy home-coming, as a hero, to the old garden, and the girl who was to wait for him there.

He raised himself a little, and turned to Mrs. Austin, who was leaning back against Frank's Indian shawl. "Do you remember," he said, "how we used to play battledoor and shuttlecock at West Hill?"

She looked down at his uplifted face. "Yes," she answered, in her tranquil voice; "I remember." And after a just perceptible pause, she added "perfectly."

That "perfectly" disconcerted him a little, and checked a sentence on his lips. As a rule it is not a perfect but a discriminating memory which we desire to find in our friends. Gilbert asked himself whether there was a touch of ironical meaning in her words, or only a frank simplicity. "It's a long while ago!" he said. It was a safe remark to make and not an original one. Yet something in his accent made it sound almost like an entreaty.

Mrs. Austin smiled. "It's a very long while ago. These young people were in the nursery then, I suppose, and now their turn has come round."

"Do we only have one turn?" said Gilbert, looking down and touching the end of the shawl which trailed on the short dry turf.

"Ah, that I can't say!" she answered lightly. "How can I tell what Fate may have in store for you? I fancy you are younger than I am now."

"No, no!" he exclaimed. "But tell me—am I much changed?"

Her eyes rested on him in smiling scrutiny. "No," she said; "I think you have changed very little indeed."

"You are right," he said, after a pause. "I am very little changed. And you?"

"What do you think?"

South quitted his lounging attitude and sat up. "That's a question I can't answer. You are changed, and yet I fancy you are not changed. You were only a girl, you know——"

"And now I'm an old woman!"

He winced as if the words hurt him. "Don't say that! Not even as a joke!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she retorted. "I remember now I am a year and a half younger than you."

"Oh, you may call me what you like," said Gilbert. "I can assure you I feel old enough sometimes—detestably, flatly, hopelessly old!" He spoke quickly and passionately; the sunshine lighted his fair handsome features, and the description of himself which was absurd in connection with his actual years was rendered more obviously so by the fact that, apart from a certain expression of face, Gilbert South was a very young-looking man. He had the air of being conscious of every moment of his past life. One would have said that he continually "added up the mortal amount" of days, weeks, and years which he had spent on earth, and carried the total in his weary thoughts. And all the time it seemed as if he only wanted a touch of something not easy to define, of hopefulness, perhaps, or passion, or even defiance, to make him as young as he was at five and twenty. It was hardly wanting as he turned to Mrs. Austin. "Say what you please of me! It doesn't matter. But don't say it of yourself. If *you*——"

The sentence was never finished. "I believe those two are actually going to leave off playing," he said in a tone of gentle acquiescence in the decrees of destiny.

When the time came for the party to set out on their excursion to the Castle, Frank saw them off with an anxious solicitude for their comfort, which pleased his mother very much. Tiny, behind the scenes, remarked it too, and said to herself that Frank could afford to be very polite since he was going to get rid of his two bores for the whole afternoon. She liked the politeness none the less for her knowledge of her cousin's motive, and nodded him a bright farewell as she took her place in the carriage.

To the last moment young Leicester was apparently troubled with misgivings about his ruin. "You'll remember

that it's a very little one," he said to Mrs. Austin, while his mother was arranging herself and her many shawls.

"Do you know that you are really heightening my expectations?" she replied. "When were you there last? I hope nobody has taken a fancy to it since then and put it in his pocket."

Frank laughed. "I hope not," he said. "Tiny can find it for you, if it's still there. She knows where to look for it."

"Where to look for what?" Mrs. Leicester inquired. "Wild flowers? We are quite ready, tell them, Frank." And they drove off.

As soon as they were beyond the park gates Mrs. Austin was called upon to admire the scenery. "Of course, we don't pretend to have any wonderful hills and rocks and waterfalls and things," said Mrs. Leicester. "But it is just the kind of landscape I like—so simple and English and homelike. Look at that bit of path and that stile, now—wouldn't it make a sweet little water-colour picture? With a pretty girl, you know, or an old woman in a red cloak."

It struck Mrs. Austin that the stile, or any number of stiles exactly like it, had been so wearisomely fitted with simpering rustics that the suggestion was unnecessary. Mrs. Leicester, however, obviously prided herself on the idea as an original one. "And I like this up and down much better than those very steep hills—they make such endless trouble with the horses," the good lady went on. She smiled kindly round on everything, and seemed to settle herself comfortably in the country as if it had been made to suit her. And indeed if it had been designed with that intention it would hardly have been different.

Mrs. Austin was civil though not enthusiastic in her reply. She would have preferred something wilder and

more hilly ; but, then, the sleek chestnuts were not her horses. Or, failing that, she would have had the pretty little undulations which pleased Mrs. Leicester abolished altogether. She would have liked to drive swiftly forward over wide lonely levels with the great arch of sky overhead. She did not appreciate the carefully kept hedges, enclosing stubble and turnips, nor the prim little plantations which looked like preparatory schools for young trees, nor the small spire which rose with an air of the utmost decorum above a neat churchyard.

“There is Frank !” said Tiny Vivian.

They all turned to look at the distant figure, which Tiny, who knew the road that he would take, had recognised. Frank was seen for a moment on a gentle ascent and then lost behind a clump of trees, but the glimpse remained with Mrs. Austin as a little picture. She did not know why it was that the words “the only son of his mother, and she was a widow,” came into her head as he rode away, but she realised all at once how precious the kindly, handsome, commonplace young fellow was in his own home. Mrs. Austin, as she sat absently looking at Frank’s bit of road, was thinking of a baby’s little grave, closed ten years earlier over a life too short to be borne in anybody’s mind but hers. “The only son of his mother.” And when she died the little memory could interest no one but the busy people who count up births and deaths and take pleasure in averages. Even for her it had no individuality that could be expressed in words, though she would not have parted with it for all that life could give.

Meanwhile the carriage rolled smoothly on, and she looked right and left at all the views that were pointed out to her till Mrs. Leicester was able to announce, with proud excitement, “And there—no, not *there*—a little farther—no, that tree is in the way for a moment—there! *now*,



don't you see a bit of the Castle wall! Don't *you*, Mr. South? Just beyond the field where the cow is."

Two minutes later they pulled up by the roadside, at the point nearest to the ruins, and the party set out to walk the brief remainder of the way. There was no difficulty in finding the Castle. It stood, together with a small haystack, in the corner of a dreary little field, and consisted of part of a tower, a few scattered fragments of stone, and the broken remains of a bit of low wall. "No doubt," said Mrs. Leicester, "it once extended much farther, and was a magnificent building." She added dignity to the bit of wall by calling it the "rampart." South, who assented to all her views, called it so too, as soon as he found out what she meant, and delighted her by suggesting the possibility of discovering foundations with the help of a little judicious digging. The good lady sat down on a fallen stone to consider the idea, while he undertook to walk round the ruins and inspect them more thoroughly. For this purpose he joined the other two, who were gazing up at the tower. "I don't know anything about it except that it is very old," Miss Vivian was saying as he came up. She looked a little doubtfully at Gilbert, as if she suspected him of possibly making fun of Culverdale Castle, which no one but Frank had any business to do, but after a minute she slipped quietly away and left him with Mrs. Austin.

"And what do you think of it?" he said.

She smiled. "Perhaps it would be more cheerful if there were more of it. It strikes me as the most melancholy little ruin I ever saw. It's a mercy the sun is shining."

"It *is* melancholy," he said, looking round at the flat green meadow. The tower was of a blackish gray, crusted with lichen; the grass at its foot was rank, the spreading

docks grew coarsely from the ill-drained soil, and a sluggish little stream crawled a little way off.

"People talk of fortresses frowning," said Mrs. Austin ; "I think this would if it could. There's a touch of malice about it, though it is too petty to threaten."

"It isn't amiable-looking," said Gilbert, with an air of entire conviction. He knew what he was expected to say, though in truth he was not thinking much about the Castle. They strolled a little farther, and when they reached the wall he made a careful survey of the other side.

"What are you looking for?" Mrs. Austin inquired.

He laughed a little consciously. "Walls have ears, they say. It's true this might be deaf by now—it's old enough."

She raised her eyes to his face. "Does it matter whether it's deaf or not?"

"Well, yes ; I think it does. There might be a country bumpkin asleep on the grass. We might wake him up."

"If I understand country bumpkins, we should be doing him a service."

Gilbert stood smiling and pulling his moustache, as if he were calling up a half-remembered scene. "Once I thought myself alone," he said, "utterly alone. That was in a ruin, too, a long while ago, and I—well, I recited some poetry. Suddenly I felt an impulse to look behind a pillar, and there was a brute, in a cheap travelling suit, grinning from ear to ear. I had a great mind to kill him."

"You didn't, I hope?" said Mrs. Austin, sitting down on a broken bit of wall and putting up her parasol. "Not but what there are plenty of people in cheap travelling suits."

"No, I took off my hat to him, and walked away. I didn't kill him, but I think I might as well ; he couldn't have haunted me worse. However, it taught me caution."

"So it seems. And you are going to recite poetry now?"

"No; I don't think I am. At least—yes. I am going to talk about Cornwall."

"Is that poetry?"

"Isn't it?" said Gilbert, coming a step nearer. "Or, rather, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps in King Arthur's days."

"In no days of your own?—of our own?" he persisted, in a low voice. "If the old time at West Hill wasn't poetry, there has been none in my life. You said this morning you had not forgotten it."

"No," she answered, "I have not; but if that were poetry, it strikes me that the volume was closed and laid away a long while ago."

"It is true," said South. "You needn't remind me that I was the first to close it. I'm not likely to forget that! But, for the sake of those old Cornish days, I want you to let me say a word of explanation."

Mrs. Austin shook her head with a smile that was half-hopeless, half-compassionate. "No, no; there is no need of explanation—do not let us have any. You make me repeat myself," she added lightly. "I told Mr. Leicester this morning that I objected to explanations."

South arched his brows. "It seems to me that it was early for Mr. Leicester to be trying to explain himself!"

"Possibly. And for you it is—late." Her tone was very kind as she went on. "Do you not see that if I had misunderstood you all these years, you could hardly set me right now? But I don't think I did misunderstand you; and for proof of it we were to be friends; and we are friends, I hope."

"It was all my fault," said South; "and to think that I never saw you from the day we parted at West Hill till yesterday! Tell me what you thought of me after I went."

She met his glance, but evaded his question. "There was no fault in the matter. Don't you remember we were to be quite free? You had a right to change your mind, and so had I."

"I was a fool! I was a raw boy—I was flattered; and she never meant anything!"

Mrs. Austin made a quick sign with her hand. "Oh, let it all rest!" she said. "You wrote afterwards; you did explain all that there was to explain. It was then that we agreed to be friends. Let us keep to that. As you say, it was only a boy and girl affair." She rose as she spoke, but Gilbert followed her.

"It is hard," he said. "My best wouldn't have been good enough; and it is you, of all people in the world, who know the worst of me."

She stopped, looked him in the face, and smiled. "It isn't very bad," she said, in her gentle voice; and South felt himself a feather-weight in the scale, whether for good or evil.

He was silent, but with so unsatisfied an expression that it was evident he only lacked words for the moment, and would seek to speak again later. Mrs. Austin anticipated him.

"Were you out of your teens when we said 'Good-bye'? Well, not much more, at any rate. Our real lives have been since then. I think people ought to keep their consciences in two or three compartments, and shut the lid down on all such bygone shortcomings. I am glad we have met again, if only to shake hands and say simply that we have outgrown old follies."

Gilbert looked down. "I was to have been a hero," he said bitterly. "Do you remember?"

"Oh, I lived in King Arthur's Cornwall in those days—in Camelot and Tintagel," she replied. "No doubt you

were to have been Galahad, or Percival at the very least. I expected the most wonderful things of all my friends."

"I think you did." He hesitated for a moment. "Are you more merciful now?" he asked, in a tone which was between jest and earnest.

"Oh yes," was the ready answer; "I'm greatly changed. I can assure you that now I expect very little."

They were walking slowly at a little distance from the tower, and as the last words were spoken they caught sight of Tiny Vivian. She appeared to be intently studying the old stones. The dreary little nook in which she stood, pulling an ivy spray from the crumbling masonry, framed a picture of youth, full of delicate grace and hope. South gazed for a moment, and then turned to Mrs. Austin with a faint laugh. "She is in her teens still," he said.

When Frank came back from Bridge End that evening he found a bunch of ivy-leaves on his dressing-table. They had evidently been carefully chosen for variety of shape and colour, and were very daintily arranged. He uttered an impatient exclamation when he caught sight of the significant little bouquet, and stood looking at it with a frown. He knew that his cousin had stolen it during his absence, and left it as a token that Gilbert South had had his turn that afternoon.

### III

MRS. LEICESTER troubled herself very little about her matchmaking. When she happened to observe Mrs. Austin and Mr. South she thought they seemed to be very good friends; and when they were out of sight she supposed that they were together somewhere and getting on nicely. She did not quite know what she would get them for a wedding present, but she determined to run up to town with Frank and look about her. There were sure to be pretty things in the shops. Meanwhile she was very well satisfied. Frank seemed all right, and, that being so, Mrs. Leicester hardly noticed that, as the days went by, his little cousin was not quite her simple, happy self of a fortnight earlier, and that these two, who had been such allies, were no longer on their old footing.

Gilbert made no attempt to resume the talk which was broken off in the ruined castle. He appeared to have tacitly accepted Mrs. Austin's offer of friendship without explanations; and though from time to time he would turn to her with some allusion to the past, some "Do you remember?" which sent her thoughts away from Culverdale to scenes where he alone could follow, he touched always on those earlier recollections which needed no apology from him and no pardon from her. She would answer readily enough; but Gilbert, who remembered the time when she believed in him, was apt to imagine a delicate yet un-

mistakable irony in her untroubled smile. To Frank it revealed a wonderful, far-off tranquillity; but then Frank was very much in love. Mrs. Austin had opened his eyes, and he was prepared to spend his life in a rapturous study of this first miracle. He felt himself at a disadvantage with regard to South, who could look back to a past in which she had a share, instead of a degrading memory of measles and extreme youth; yet, in spite of his humility, he was not unhappy. Mrs. Austin could not fail to perceive his devotion, but she never for one moment supposed that there was anything serious or lasting in it. It seemed to her like a little nosegay of spring flowers, which she might accept with a gracious word of thanks, and she was touched by the thought of its very transitoriness. She was very kind to Frank. Within a week she had learnt his ways and looks and words as one might learn the few simple notes of a bird in one's garden; and yet they pleased her better than a more elaborate performance. "Poor fellow!" she would say to herself, with a half-whimsical regret, "it is not my fault—I cannot help it; but if he only knew *how* young he seems to me, how he would hate me!" There, however, she was wrong. Frank would have forgiven her even that.

The warm September days slipped away one after the other, and the only thing of which the young lover could complain was that they were shortened in a quite unjustifiable way, which was not mentioned in the almanac. The sun was slow to rise; but when once breakfast-time had arrived, he rushed across the heavens, went headlong down the west, and Frank found himself dressing for dinner, with the certainty that only a few short hours parted him from bedtime. It is true that the nights had grown long, so long that they could not all be spent in sleep. His light burnt late, and even when it was extinguished it did

not follow that he was at rest. Sometimes he was stargazing. He had never taken such particular notice of the stars before, but they attracted him now because they reminded him of Mrs. Austin. He had made the discovery that certain things—besides old teapots—were in harmony with Mrs. Austin, and consequently possessed something of her charm; and he was beginning a classification of the contents of the universe, as tried by this test. He felt that the midnight sky was very sublime, and that he himself was absurdly unimportant. How could he become more worthy of notice? What sort of destinies used people to fancy they read in the stars? Frank, as he leaned against his window and fixed his eyes upon the far-off points of light, reflected that in all probability he would be High Sheriff one of these days. He wondered whether Mrs. Austin would like a man to be Sheriff. But that would only be for a year. Perhaps it would be better to try to get into Parliament. There was a neighbouring borough which was something of a forlorn hope—he might try that. There must be an election before long; perhaps Mrs. Austin would come down, wear his colours, encourage his supporters, and rejoice in his victory. Only—confound it!—the ballot had spoilt all the fun, and there was no chance of a real good contest, such as they used to have in old times, when the flags were flying, the money going, and the agents outwitting each other for days together. He would have liked the gathering excitement of a prolonged battle; he would not even have minded a little rioting; in fact, an unfriendly mob, howling down any attempt at speech, and to be confronted only with good-humoured coolness and the superior manners of a gentleman, seemed less terrible to Frank than cold-blooded voters asking questions about his views on unexpected subjects. Nevertheless, for Mrs. Austin's sake, he would



face even that ordeal. He remembered, moreover, that the father of one of the neighbouring landowners had been made a baronet—why might not he be made a baronet? It is true that, for his own part, he had no especial desire to be called “Sir Francis,” but “Lady Leicester” seemed to him a name not unworthy to be uttered softly, at night, in the presence of the stars.

Mrs. Austin knew nothing of these soaring dreams, which only awaited a word from her lips to become serious intentions. She had no particular ambition on Frank's behalf; in fact, the young squire and his surroundings seemed to her almost ideally perfect. The very heaviness of life at Culverdale pleased her; there was something solid, respectable, and sincere about it; a sense of prosperous restfulness and security rooted deeply in the earth that she found charming—for a fortnight. She liked to walk with Frank under his spreading trees, and call up faint visions of wives and sisters of bygone squires, who had known those great trunks as slender saplings, and lived and died under their gradually widening shadows. She could even find names for a few of these phantoms, for she had been to the neat little church (Frank's father had restored it), and had seen their monuments, with urns, and cherubs, and festoons of marble drapery, upon the walls. It was strange to look at Frank, with the sunshine glancing through a little lancet window on his head, and to think that he too would have a tablet on those neat cold walls one day, and that other guests would stay at the Hall, and come on Sundays and study it during service time. Frank, at her elbow, read the responses, with a consciousness of his importance to the Established Church, which might have been absurd if it had not been so simple and honest. He sat through the sermon in an attitude expressive of deeper interest than Mrs. Austin found practicable. How

was she to know that the whole of that discourse, as the young man heard it, was about herself?

For her own part, she had dreams, but, less happy than Frank, her dreams were of the past instead of the future. When Gilbert South had asked her if she remembered the old time at West Hill, she had answered, "Perfectly." It was quite true; the picture was there, but it had not been called up for years as his words called it up. Even when he did not speak, the knowledge that it was continually in his thoughts seemed to give it a kind of independent existence. Mrs. Austin found herself recalling it in idle moments, and dwelling on all manner of little incidents and details which had been thrust into the background by later events. The old house and garden rose up before her as she knew them in her childish days; the gateway hung with ivy, the apple-tree, under her bedroom window, warped, and leaning away from the strong west winds; the countless blossoms of narcissus and daffodil in early spring. She remembered the hoarse roar of the sea as she lay in bed on stormy nights, the shrieking of the hurrying gusts, the fierce lashing of the driven drops upon the pane, and then the stillness and the rain-washed sweetness of the morning when she woke. It all came back to her, even to the tufts of fern, and the small green leaf-cups growing on the garden wall; but it came back with that peculiar charm of tender remembrance which, combining many impressions of that which we have lost, creates one more beautiful than all. She saw it with a deeper colour in the sea, a wilder splendour of sunsets, a pearly clearness in the morning sky, and a wonderful purity in the lucid depths of air. More than once since she came to Culverdale it had chanced to her, falling asleep at night, while poor Frank was seeking his fortune in the stars, to dream that she saw Gilbert coming towards her along the grassy path. It was

almost impossible to wake from such a dream, and not to look with curious interest at the real man when he came down to breakfast.

With all these preoccupations it was hardly surprising that Mrs. Austin did not give much thought to Tiny Vivian, beyond a vague and general goodwill, which the girl did not return. Tiny had never changed her mind about Mrs. Austin. "I said I shouldn't like her, and I don't," she triumphantly repeated one day as she stood talking to Frank.

"It's a fine thing to be consistent, isn't it?" said Frank drily.

"It's much better than changing one's mind for ever. I can't see anything so very wonderful about her. Of course she has been good-looking, but so have lots of people, according to what they say. And anybody might talk in that affected way, as if her words were much more precious than anybody else's. It makes me cross."

"So I see."

"I could talk like that, and walk like that too! Look here." And Tiny swept round the room in an imitation of Mrs. Austin, which would have been very tolerable to anybody but Frank.

"Oh, of course!" he said. "That's always the way. Let one woman get hold of another, and one knows what to expect."

"And pray what does one expect?"

"Well, neither justice nor mercy. I suppose you can't help it."

"Oh, indeed!" said Tiny. "Then I should like to know what Mrs. Austin says of *me*!"

"As far as I know she doesn't say anything," he answered coolly.

Tiny was pained at Frank's manner, but she looked

him in the face and smiled only the more resolutely. "No," she said, "of course she doesn't. That's just what I say. She's awfully stuck up and cold. I can quite understand her jilting Mr. South."

"How do you know she did jilt Mr. South?" he inquired in an irritating tone.

"Why, Frank, didn't she go and marry that other man? Of course she jilted him, and she'd do it again just as likely as not, only I hope he won't give her the chance. He's worth fifty of her! Oh my goodness!" Tiny exclaimed with a burst of defiant laughter, "what a regiment that would be!"

It was quite right that Tiny should speak up for Mr. South, since but for him she would have stood a chance of being somewhat neglected. Gilbert, however, would not suffer that. Apart from the fact that he found Tiny very fascinating, with her great eager eyes, her quick smiles, and the supreme charm of being still in her teens, he could never endure to see any one slighted. His nature was sweet and kindly to the core, and he was always ready to give the sympathy, which, to say the truth, he required rather lavishly. He liked to talk about himself in tones of confidential melancholy, slightly dashed with bitterness. But he would talk to you just as readily about yourself, showing a gentle warmth of interest which was flattering and agreeable. This kind of thing was new to Tiny. Frank was not in the habit of saying much about his inner feelings, and certainly would not have known what to make of Tiny's if she had attempted to express them. Perhaps the girl had been less conscious of having such feelings to express before Mr. South came. It was new to her, too, being accustomed to play a subordinate part, in consequence of youth and inexperience, to meet with some one who considered youthful impressions of far greater value than

the dull and blunted opinions of middle age. The squires and rectors about Culverdale did not express such views, nor did their wives and daughters set such value on the artless ideas of a girl who had been nowhere and known nobody. Tiny in a simple unthinking way had loved the country lanes and meadows among which she had been brought up, but with Mr. South's arrival came a quickened consciousness of their beauty and of her feelings about them. She was already a little less simple in consequence of his worship of simplicity, and her great brown eyes were more eager, and sometimes more thoughtful.

The time passed on till Mrs. Austin's visit was within three days of its close. She was to leave Culverdale on the Thursday, and this was the Monday evening, when a garden-party at the house of some friends of the Leicesters ended in an impromptu dance. Gilbert came up to her as she sat fanning herself, and watching the revolving couples. She shook her head in answer to his request. "Don't ask me," she said. "I haven't danced for years." And she glanced, not without a touch of amusement, at Frank, who had already been rejected, and who stood a little way off, very erect and melancholy.

"Why not?" said Gilbert.

"My dancing days are over," she replied simply. "Go and dance with some of these young people. I see plenty of pretty girls who will be quite ready for a new partner."

He neither moved nor answered, and she turned her head and looked up at him from her low chair. He stood by her side with downcast eyes, pulling his moustache with what would have looked almost like an air of irritation, if she had not known that he was never really out of temper. His expression and attitude reminded her of old days, when he was apt to be offended for a moment because some one

had laughed at him, and he never liked to be laughed at. But after a brief pause she looked at him more attentively. Old use had taught her to read Gilbert's face like an open book, more readily than any other face on earth, yet there was something perplexing in it now. Did he care so much to dance with her? She leaned back and waited, knowing that he was sure to speak before long.

"It is always the same thing," he said presently. "This is over, and that is over. And when I remember you everything was just beginning."

"But that was a long while ago—as I think we have frequently remarked."

Gilbert's eyes were fixed on a bit of scarlet geranium which had fallen on the floor. "Yes," he said, "I have missed everything somehow."

"One would think you were a second Rip van Winkle, you seem to find it so hard to realise the lapse of time. You haven't by chance been asleep for a dozen years or so, have you?"

"Upon my word I don't know. I think perhaps I may have been." He moved the bit of red blossom with his foot, and studied it under its new aspect. "Asleep and dreaming perhaps," he said in a low voice.

"Well," Mrs. Austin replied, "as far as I am concerned there is no great difficulty. Since you know the year in which I was born, you have only to buy an almanac, or to look at the top of a newspaper, and I think you will be able to calculate that I am thirty-seven."

"Oh, I know that very well. You will not let me forget it."

"Will not let you forget it? Could you forget it if I would let you?"

"No," said South, lowering his voice still more. "I don't suppose I could. I have learnt my lesson, I think."

But I can swear to you that I never remembered it till you taught me."

The music stopped abruptly as he spoke, and seemed to make a sudden vacancy in the air, into which there poured a confused murmur of voices and sweeping of dresses as the dancers strolled by. Among them, with a carmine flush on her soft brown cheek, went Tiny Vivian, and raised her long lashes for one brilliant glance as she passed. "Miss Vivian looks especially well to-night," Mrs. Austin remarked, looking after her, and Gilbert murmured some reply, but the expression which had perplexed his companion deepened on his face. Her attention was distracted for a moment by the arrival of the master of the house, a stout white-whiskered old gentleman, who benignantly expressed the opinion that it was a pleasant sight to see the young people enjoying themselves. When she had agreed with him as completely as he could wish, she looked quickly round, but the tall figure had vanished from her side.

He had gone away to follow once more a useless round of thought which had grown drearily familiar to him of late. He was haunted by the memories which he had called up. He had tried to bring them to life again, and instead they flitted round him like mocking ghosts, to be seen but never to be touched. Those happy days in Cornwall were like the opening of a poem, but it had ended in the flattest and feeblest prose. At twenty he was to have been a hero, at thirty-nine he was nothing, and knew that he never would be anything. The experience was not remarkable, but in most cases the contrast is rendered endurable by the gentle influence of time. We become accustomed to it before it is so terribly defined, and half-forget the splendour of the starting-point before we reach the pitiful goal. But South was not so fortunate. He saw them both, and saw them always, in Mildred's eyes.

As he stood by the door gazing idly round, his glance suddenly encountered Tiny Vivian's. She looked at him as if she dimly divined his trouble, but turned away her head the moment he noticed her, and yet that swift glance, with its vague proffer of sympathy, came like a ray of light into his dull perplexity. Tiny's eyes, at least, had no reflection of a mocking past in them, and never told him that he was a failure.



#### IV

It happens occasionally that an unexpected chill will suddenly depress us, an undefinable blight which seems to come from nowhere in particular and to be everywhere. The weather may have something to do with it, but the chill is within us as well as without, and the outward aspect of things can only emphasise its dreariness.

Something of the kind befell the inhabitants of the Manor House on the Tuesday morning. Every one was dull, the sky was clouded, and the world seemed to have grown old. Gilbert South had a harassed and weary expression, Tiny owned to a headache, Mrs. Leicester was worried by the knowledge that fifteen people were coming to dinner, and that she must keep awake all the evening, and Frank was conscious of nothing but the shadow of Mrs. Austin's approaching departure. Mrs. Austin herself was inclined to think that she had had more than enough of Culverdale. She had never known a place which depended so much on the sunshine for what beauty it possessed, and, in the uniformly diffused shadow, the low-lying park and the meadows with their lines of hedge and ditch oppressed her with a sense of unendurable monotony. There was really nothing to distinguish one enclosure from another, unless it were the presence of cows or sheep. One would have said that the soil of Frank's inheritance was heavy with the dulness of many generations, which

rose on sunless days like an exhalation, not precisely poisonous, since good family feelings and respectable virtues would take no harm in it, but far too dense for winged and delicate fancies. Consequently there was no chance of escaping from it even in thought. In truth there seemed no limit to its influence. Mrs. Austin, while she dressed, looked across the river to the village, and saw how the church stood solidly planted among its white gravestones, and pointed with a sharp little spire to a gray and dreary region on high. It was hardly an encouraging prospect.

Frank, poor fellow, suffered from her depression. He was too closely connected with his surroundings to be a congenial companion on such a day; his acres burdened him and dragged him down, and he found her not unkind, but languid and cold. Gilbert South might perhaps have called up other scenes and times by the mere sound of his voice, but he was silent at breakfast-time, and disappeared almost immediately afterwards. It was vaguely understood that he had important letters to write. And, after all, Mrs. Austin was not very sure that she needed any company. As she sat in the drawing-room, turning the pages of a novel as an excuse for silence, she half-unconsciously followed a thread of thought which stretched backward to her girlish days and onward to her future. She was still pursuing it in the afternoon when she drove with Tiny Vivian to the neighbouring town to make some purchases for Mrs. Leicester.

The little town remained in her memory as a picture, as places sometimes do, which, being seen but once, in one mood and under one aspect, are not blurred and confused by conflicting impressions. The sullen clouds were as much a part of it as the foot-worn pavement, and a man with an organ, grinding a tune which had been popular a

season or two before, was just as important as the vicar who went by with a bundle of little tracts and bowed to Miss Vivian. The carriage stopped and went on as Tiny directed, the tradesmen started out of their shops as if somebody had pulled a string, and stood bareheaded and smiling at the door while she consulted Mrs. Leicester's list of commissions. At one place she went in, and Mrs. Austin was left alone in a little square. The Town Hall was there, ERECTED MDCCCXLIII., and there also was a drinking-fountain with an inscription which she could not read. The great clock overhead struck four like a knell, and startled her just as she was thinking that Gilbert South certainly was not a hero, and yet—— And a moment later Tiny came out and said "Home" to the coachman.

They did not talk much as they drove back. When the lodge-keeper swung the gate open at the sound of their approach, it occurred to Mrs. Austin to wonder what Tiny had been thinking about so intently all the time.

That evening, after dinner, South came to her, and stood for a few minutes turning over some photographs which lay at her elbow. One of them was of a place which he knew and she did not, and in answer to a question of hers he described it. He pressed his hand on the table as he spoke, and a white scar across one of his fingers stood out more prominently and caught Mrs. Austin's eye.

"That cut of yours left a mark," she said, when he had finished. "How frightened I was—do you remember?"

Gilbert looked first at his hand and then at her with a strange, startled expression, almost as if he felt a throb of pain in his old wound. "Yes," he said, "I remember." And all at once the colour came into his face as if he were a boy again. "I was cutting a stick for your brother Jack," he added hurriedly, "and the knife slipped. Your mother tied it up for me."

"Yes, we found her in her storeroom. I think Jack thought you were going to die." Mrs. Austin, for a moment, instead of seeing seven or eight country gentlemen, most of them bald, and as many ladies, grouped in the Culverdale drawing-room, saw a sunshiny room, full of shelves and cupboards and boxes, where her mother, with capable hands, was bandaging that finger of Gilbert's, while Jack (poor fellow! he died at school) stood looking on, scared at first, and then, when he found that mother could set it all right, a little aggrieved because after all he hadn't got his stick. Oh, how long ago it all was, and how sadly the old home was broken up! She would have liked to take Gilbert's left hand in hers and hold it, just for the sake of that little scar and the dear people who were dead. And how deeply the memory of that time touched him! Why did he colour up so suddenly at her question and turn away? Was there something special about this one incident? All at once it struck her that hitherto it had been Gilbert, and not she, who had said "Do you remember?" Was he so pleased that she should say it? She recollected, too, that it was while he still had his hand bandaged that he spoke to her one evening by the white roses, and she promised to wait for him till he should come back to the old home. Perhaps that remembrance had called up his blush. Poor Gilbert, could he never forget his boyish inconstancy?

Mrs. Leicester heaved a deep sigh of relief when her guests were gone. "Dear me!" she said suddenly to Mrs. Austin, "is to-morrow really your last day with us? What are you all going to do to-morrow?"

There was a pause. "Are not we going to row down the river to some farmhouse?" Mrs. Austin inquired, looking round.

"To old Green's," said Frank.

"Speak for yourself, my dear," said Mrs. Leicester, laughing and nodding. "You don't catch me rowing down rivers. I shall have to die some day, I suppose, but there are plenty of ways of doing it without being drowned."

"Drowned?" Mrs. Austin repeated, with a glance at Frank.

"My mother wouldn't venture on a ditch in a lifeboat without making her will and saying good-bye to me," he answered.

"No," Mrs. Leicester replied, in a tone of cheerful assent. "I'm a coward about the water. It's a very good thing everybody isn't like me. I'm sure I should never have found America or Australia or any of those places."

"No," said Frank, "nor the Isle of Wight. You might have seen it was there, like the moon."

"I thought you said you must go to the Carletons to-morrow," said Tiny in a low voice to Mrs. Leicester.

"Good gracious, so I must. I forgot. And you must go there with me, you know."

"I won't drown you, if you'll trust me," said Frank to Mrs. Austin.

"I'm not afraid," she smiled. "But you see it seems as if nobody would be able to go."

"You said you should like it," Frank persisted, turning his back to the others, and looking fixedly at her.

"It would be very pleasant if it is a fine day," she replied quietly. "But I don't want you to go entirely for me. I thought we were all going."

"I am going anyhow," he said, "to-morrow or the next day. I want to speak to Green. Of course you will do what you like best. I thought you said you would like it."

"I am so sorry I must take Tiny," said Mrs. Leicester. "Old Mrs. Carleton is her godmother, and she wants to see her, so I really must. What will you do? Will you

come with us, or will you go with Frank? I'm sure he is always very careful, and of course there isn't any danger really."

Mrs. Austin had no desire to make Frank miserable on the last day of her stay. "Oh, I should like the row very much if it is fine," she said.

"That's settled then," said Mrs. Leicester cheerfully. "Mr. South, if there's nothing you want to do to-morrow, I'm sure we shall either of us be very pleased if you'll join us."

Frank scowled. But Gilbert, while he professed his delighted readiness to go anywhere or do anything, had not the slightest intention of proposing to make one of the water party. He was convinced that it would be fraught with peril—for him. "That hot-headed boy would certainly do his best to upset me into the river if I interfered with his arrangements," he said to himself. "If he could contrive to give me a ducking, without splashing her, it would fill his soul with pure delight." Gilbert thought he would call on old Mrs. Carleton, who was unlikely to indulge in any such pranks.

Mrs. Leicester was really sorry that she was obliged to break up the party on this last day. She could not see for her part why Mildred and Mr. South had not settled matters a week ago, and enjoyed themselves comfortably as an engaged couple, taking their share of privileges and joking remarks. But she supposed it was to be put off till the end of Mildred's visit, and she was anxious to give Gilbert a chance of coming to the point. She had noticed that Frank seemed to prefer Mrs. Austin to Mr. South, and was inclined to bestow the attention which should have been divided between his guests entirely on her. Frank was inconsiderate at times, but she would give him a quiet hint to leave the two to themselves when they came back from their respective expeditions.

Gilbert South, unconscious of her beneficent schemes, woke the next morning to a dreary certainty that his visit to Culverdale had been a mistake from first to last. For years he had remembered Mildred Fairfax as the truest, the most loving, the most beautiful of womankind. He had dreamed of seeing her again, their meeting had been the one desirable possibility of his life. At last it had come; and he had found her no longer young, beautiful still in her widowhood, but pale, calm, clear-sighted, self-possessed, putting aside his attempt to utter his repentance with gentle words about friendship: Frank might well worship her in his boyish fashion; he was quite right, he had never seen Mildred Fairfax. But for his own part, Gilbert, had he known her intentions, instead of gratefully blessing good Mrs. Leicester, would rather have been inclined to complain to her, very ungratefully and unjustly, "You have

"Unsettled the pure picture in my mind;  
A girl, she was so perfect, so distinct.  
. . . I detest all change,  
And most a change in aught I loved long since."

That was the worst of it. He could not even go back to his dream. Call them up as he would with anxious efforts, his memories of his old love had been slowly dying, day by day, ever since he came to Culverdale. The actual recollections remained cold, dead facts, but nothing more. There were moments when Tiny Vivian, just because of her youth and hopefulness, seemed nearer the true spirit of his former love than Mrs. Austin. It was not unnatural. If we idealise the past, and most of us do, there is an interval after which old books should not be reopened, old haunts should not be revisited, nor old loves sought out, except with a deliberate view to disenchantment. We expect too much. No sympathy is so perfect as that which we imagine. And Gilbert South had been especially fanciful and dreamy

in his recollections. He had had, as it were, just a glimpse of Mildred's pure, girlish love, and then he had been drawn away by a woman older than himself who wanted a little amusement. He had been made a fool of, coarsely, by a practised flirt. Afterwards he attempted to go back; he wrote a dozen letters of explanation and repentance, and of course sent off the worst. It was a failure, and partly in pique, partly in real disgust at himself, for he had a delicate taste, and his first faithlessness left an unpleasant flavour in his mouth, he swore constancy to Mildred's memory as he supposed, but in reality to himself as he would have had himself. It was that former self as well as his former love he had hoped to find again when he met Mrs. Austin.

With her it was different. She had trusted him and he had failed her; the pain had been keen, but with a touch of scorn in it. And later, when the wound was healed and all bitterness gone, she thought of him, not unkindly, but as one whose nature was light and fickle. When she discovered how constantly he had looked back to that old love which she supposed was utterly forgotten, her memory awoke like the autumn blossoming of spring flowers.

On that last day all the interest seemed to be concentrated on the water expedition, as if it were indeed a voyage of vast importance. Nobody thought about the people who meant to call on old Mrs. Carleton, but one would have said that Frank and Mrs. Austin were going to discover a new island at least, and indeed the young fellow had such an impression concerning it as, if it happens to be verified, we call a presentiment. Mr. South and Tiny came down to the river to see them off, but, owing to some little delay in Frank's arrangements, they were obliged to go back, lest they should keep Mrs. Leicester waiting, and leave Mrs. Austin where she stood, a slim dark figure at



the water's edge. The dull gray surface, with its floating leaves and its grasses drawn by the silent current, was shaded by great groups of trees, whose dusky greenness was lighted here and there by gleams of autumn yellow. Mrs. Austin did not move, no breath of wind stirred the dark masses of foliage overhead ; it was like a picture with something of melancholy stateliness about it. When Frank was ready the solitary figure disappeared from the bank, and they went gliding from under the shadow of the trees out into the wide, sunless fields.

Honestly, it was not a very beautiful scene. To Frank, who had known it all his life, the question of its beauty or ugliness did not occur ; it was simply *the* river, and as such it had moulded his conception of all rivers. On its dull waters such childish dreams as he had known had embarked and set sail. As a boy he had fished there, just as four or five urchins were fishing now. They stared, open-mouthed and silent, at young Mr. Leicester and his boat, but took no notice of the lady who looked with a musing smile at the little rustic group as she went by. Presently came a curve in the stream, where a clump of alders grew, and bushes leaned despondently over the water which was eating the earth away from their roots. The more distant prospect showed a monotonous variety of ploughed land and pasture, with lines of trees following the hedges, and here and there a cottage or two and a bit of road. Mrs. Austin and Frank talked as they went. He told her how one bitter winter the river was frozen, and he skated to the farm where they were going now. He pointed out a lonely house, and spoke of the people who lived there. He showed her how far the floods had reached in a wet season, a muddy expanse in which little files of cropped willows seemed to wade knee-deep, and the water washed through the gates of lost meadows. And he broke off suddenly in

the midst of what he was saying to ask, "Where shall you be this time to-morrow?"

"Half-way to London, I should think," she answered; "I don't know how long the journey takes."

Frank looked at her and was silent. He wondered whether he should speak as they came back.

The Greens' house stood by the roadside a little way from the river. The farm-buildings and some big stacks had a pleasant prosperous air, but the house itself was an ugly little plastered box, with a bit of treeless garden in front, blossoming with prim sulphur-coloured dahlias. Frank did not seem to have much to say to old Green after all. The two exchanged a few words and then came to the little parlour, where Mrs. Austin sat on a horsehair sofa giving the latest news of Mrs. Leicester and Miss Vivian to the farmer's wife. Frank was on very pleasant terms with his tenants, who evidently thought their young landlord a most important personage. Other people were "high," but vaguely "high," and a duke would not have impressed Mrs. Green as much as Mr. Leicester from the Manor House. The Prince of Wales, perhaps, as a young man residing in palaces, and holding a well-defined position as the Queen's son, might have eclipsed Frank, but it would have taken a prince to do it. Mrs. Austin perceived, with a slight smile, how unimportant she was compared with her companion, but she was not in a mood to be amused by that or anything else that afternoon. She was glad to leave the house, to escape from hospitable offers of cake and home-made wine, and to find herself once more upon the road. Even then, however, the old farmer insisted that Frank should look at a shed which was not satisfactory, and she had to wait while the matter was discussed.

There was a little pond with neat white railings just opposite the house, and she strolled across and stood by it

with a mysterious sense of loneliness and desolation upon her. Still as the afternoon was, she fancied that there was a mournful little rustling in the boughs of a stunted oak which grew a few yards away. The little pool mirrored a vacant gray sky. It was absurd, and yet she felt as if she would have given anything to see Gilbert South coming towards her, instead of which it was Frank, who tore himself away from the farmer and darted across the road.

"I've kept you waiting," he said; "I'm so sorry! Oh, and you are tired, aren't you?"

"A little," she allowed. "Nothing to matter."

"It's too bad of me! What can I do?" he exclaimed with anxious solicitude. "Come in again and let Mrs. Green make you some tea."

"Oh no, no," she said. "I would rather go back."

Frank was in despair. He reproached himself. "What a brute I am!"

Mrs. Austin fairly laughed at the intensity of his remorse. "What would you do if I were very tired?" she said.

He hardly dared to speak to her as they went back, and perhaps it was owing to that enforced silence that later he recalled with especial vividness the splash of his oars on their quietly winding way, the little ripples dying among the dry autumnal reeds on either bank, and the light from the west, where a pale sun struggled feebly through the clouds, falling coldly on the beautiful face before him. For Mrs. Austin, meanwhile, a soft current of thought flowed with the river, setting ever more strongly towards a final resolution. If it rested with her to make Gilbert South happy, why should she not do it? He was not what she had once imagined him, yet he was truer and better than she had believed him during the years they had been parted. There was no man living whose thoughts and memories, nay, whose little tricks of speech and gesture, were bound up

with her past life as Gilbert's were; and the recollection of his troubled face haunted her like a reproach. "Why not?" she said to herself over and over again, to the measured sound of Frank's oars. "Why not?—why not?—if it would make him happy."

"I don't know why it is," she said to young Leicester when they had landed, and were walking slowly up to the house, "but I have had a feeling all this afternoon as if something were going to happen."

"That's funny," said Frank; "so have I."

"Have you really? If I had known that I might have wondered whether you were really going to drown me. But here we are, safely landed, in spite of our forebodings."

He surveyed the sullen sky. "Perhaps there's thunder in the air," he suggested.

"Perhaps. That might account for my feeling tired. I've been a dull companion, I fear."

"No," Frank was beginning to say, when he stopped short. They had just come in sight of the house, and he stared at a farmer's chaise, driven by a labouring man, which was going away from the front door. "That's old Clayton's trap," he said; "what on earth has that come here for? And—why, surely that's my mother coming to meet us—they can't possibly have been there and got back by this time!"

"There has been an accident!" said Mrs. Austin with sudden certainty. "Go and see what has happened. Your mother is safe, but——"

Frank ran forward. It was his mother hurrying down the drive. "What is it?" he said.

"Oh, Frank!" she cried. "Oh, my dear boy! Those dreadful horses!"

"What's the matter? The new horses?"

"Yes. We went by Upton Lane because I wanted to

inquire about Barker's wife—by the railway cutting, you know. She likes to see one if it's only for a minute—at least she did like, poor thing!"

Frank stamped impatiently. "—— Barker's wife!" he said. "Is anybody hurt? Is anybody dead?"

"She's dead—she died yesterday—nobody else."

"Oh, go on! go on! What happened?"

"Why, I went in just to speak to poor Barker——" Barker's final destiny was so nearly settled that Mrs. Leicester gasped and hurried on—"and the express rushed by, at least I think it was the express—they shouldn't make them scream so, Frank, it isn't whistling, it's a downright scream—and the horses bolted down the lane to the left, and he couldn't hold them——"

"The lane to the gravel-pit!" said Frank, in a horror-struck voice.

"Yes! And Tiny and Mr. South! But they dashed against a bit of wall at the turning, and were thrown out."

"Are they hurt? Much?"

"No, nobody is hurt, only shaken. But oh, Frank!"

"The horses?" said Frank, greatly relieved.

"Nothing much. Robinson says it's quite wonderful. There's no harm done."

"What then?" Frank grasped his mother's arm. "There's something more. Tiny is hurt—I know she is. Why don't you say so?"

"No, she isn't; she isn't indeed, nor Mr. South either."

"Well?"

"They are not hurt," said Mrs. Leicester desperately, "but they're engaged to be married!"

She looked as if she expected an explosion, but none followed. Frank's hand unclosed and dropped by his side, and he stood for a moment staring dumbly at her. "Are

you sure you didn't fall out too, and pitch on your head?" he said at last.

"No, indeed; I was in the cottage when the train came. Oh, it's quite true, Frank. You know I really couldn't help it. Are you angry?"

"Angry?" he repeated, "why should I be angry? I'm dreaming I think. It isn't a joke?" he said suddenly with a threatening frown.

"No! oh no! Is it wrong, do you think? What could I do?"

"Tiny and South!" said Frank. "Tiny! Well—if she likes him! I don't see why it should be wrong," he went on, bewildered, yet beginning to perceive how in some ways it might be marvellously right. "That's for her own people to decide. If they haven't any objection—but Tiny and South!"

"You are not angry then? You don't mind?"

"No, why should I? If Tiny is happy it's all right. But I don't seem able to believe it yet."

"Well, here is Mr. South," said Mrs. Leicester more cheerfully. "Perhaps you'll believe him."

Frank looked up and saw South coming across the grass. He was pale, but there was a peculiar brightness about his face. His eyes were shining, he smiled a little defiantly. Surprise is not the easiest thing in the world to encounter, especially if one is a little surprised at oneself. Gilbert had only just found himself out. Before Frank could take a step to meet him, Mrs. Austin, who had come up during the explanation, went forward swiftly and held out her hand.

"Gilbert, is this true?" she said. "I may congratulate you, not only on your fortunate escape, but on your engagement too?"

(Mrs. Leicester in the background arched her eyebrows

and looked at Frank. "I had forgotten her!" she whispered.)

South ceased to smile, but he met her questioning eyes honestly enough. "Yes," he said slowly, "it's quite true." He looked at her as if he would have said more.

"Then I wish you all happiness—I wish it with all my heart," she replied. There was no tremor in her soft clear voice. "I think our old friendship gives me the right to be one of the first to congratulate you."

"Thank you," Gilbert replied confusedly. He still held her hand, and looked anxiously at her as if he feared some hidden meaning in her words. "Mildred!" he said, and there was a world of pleading in his tone. "Tell me——" he stopped short. What was he going to say?

"Believe me," she said, and he felt her fingers tighten on his in a kindly clasp as she spoke, "I have always wished your happiness—always. And I am glad to think that you have found it." And with that she nodded a smiling little farewell and walked towards the house.

Gilbert gazed after her with a throb of regretful pain. He had known that it was impossible to go back to the old days, Mildred had taught him that. And yet as he looked over his shoulder at her retreating figure, he had a strange fancy that it was the very past itself, the past which he had so long worshipped and from which he had so suddenly awakened, which was at that moment leaving him for ever, a stately shape passing silently away and never looking back. He would not have recalled her, since he could not recall the Mildred who believed in him and looked at him with happy hope in her eyes. It was Tiny who believed in him now. Mildred had no need of him. Tiny had called to him, "*Gilbert!*" in their peril that afternoon, and his heart had answered the innocently appealing cry, the name by which she had never called

him, uttered as her one word then. Tiny had no need to grudge his old love that one backward glance. It was all over in a moment, and Gilbert drew a long breath, and went forward to receive Frank's congratulations.

They were rather briefly and bluntly given. Frank was eager to be gone; the picture which for Gilbert personified a softly sentimental regret was for him a vision of hope which beckoned him to follow. He uttered such good wishes as came readily to his lips, and were suitable to anybody who was going to be married. He realised the accident by the gravel-pit more clearly than the engagement, but he was too impatient and preoccupied to talk much even about that. "It's a mercy you weren't killed!" he said shortly.

"Well, I suppose it was a narrow escape," Gilbert answered with a smile.

"A narrow escape—yes, I should think so. It couldn't very well have been much narrower, as far as I can see. However, a miss is as good as a mile, I suppose."

"So they say," Gilbert replied; "but, for my own part, I should prefer the mile next time. And so would your cousin, I fancy."

"Ah, Tiny knew what you were coming to! It's no wonder if she was scared, poor child!" said Frank. "There isn't a nastier place about here. By the way, I haven't seen Tiny yet." And he brushed past Gilbert and departed, as if to congratulate Tiny were the one object of life.

He went by the stable-yard, where he speedily ascertained that the amount of damage done was so absurdly small that there was nothing serious about the whole business, except what might have been. He cut Robinson's explanations short, and hurried to the house, where, as luck would have it, he met Tiny in the hall. She



looked a little like Gilbert South, pale with agitation, and yet radiant. Her great brown eyes were shining, and her lips quivered with excitement which might end either in sobs or smiles. "Oh, Frank!" she exclaimed; and she too looked up anxiously to see how the young master received the news.

"Well," said he, taking her hands in his; "this is a pretty afternoon's work! What will your people at home say, do you suppose?"

"Oh, my people at home! They'll say what I say," Tiny answered, with a tremulous laugh. "I shall make them."

"And what do you say?"

"Oh, Frank! isn't it strange? I'm so glad, but I want you to say you are glad too. Frank, you do like him now, don't you? You are not vexed?"

"No, I'm not vexed if you are happy. Oh, I like him well enough. But I think you ought to have had somebody younger," he said doubtfully.

"Oh no, Frank," Tiny replied, with great decision. "It doesn't matter the least bit when it's the man. If it were the woman, now, it would matter; but not when it's the man."

"Well, you know best." And Frank released one of his hands. "I'm sure I wish you all happiness. It comes rather suddenly," he said, with a laugh.

"So it did to me," Tiny replied; "and I'm not sure he would have told everybody directly, but we were in the Barkers' garden; we couldn't go in because poor Mrs. Barker is dead, you know, and we were waiting till they got something to bring us home——"

"Oh, that's where it was settled?"

"Yes," Tiny answered, with a conscious little laugh. "No; I think it was settled as we tumbled out, but that

was where he said it properly. And your mother came round the corner upon us——”

“I see,” said Frank.

“They do grow such a lot of southernwood there,” Tiny went on, as the colour rushed to her cheeks. “He leant against the palings, and there was a great bush of it. He smelt like a Sunday-school nosegay as we were coming back; but he says he shall always like it now.”

The sight of Tiny, alive, laughing, and talking nonsense with quivering lips, suddenly brought the thought of her peril vividly before Frank. “Oh, Tiny!” he said, “you might have been killed!”

“Don’t,” she said; “I saw it all—the gravel-pit, you know, just as we went down into it one day; do you remember? Ever so long ago, almost the first time I stayed here. I saw it all, as if there were a terrible light in it, and I said to myself, ‘I shall die there!’ And then I called to Gilbert, and I remember his face for one moment, and we got to the turning, and before we could jump out it was all over; and there we were, picking ourselves up, and none the worse!”

“Thank God!” said Frank.

“Only so dusty; and somehow I felt very small when I found it had all ended in nothing at all.”

Frank laughed. “Never mind; it was better than being a smashed heroine.”

“And it has ended in something, only a different sort of thing, hasn’t it?” said Tiny. “Where is everybody, Frank? In the drawing-room?”

“Everybody? No; I left him with my mother on the lawn.”

Tiny made a face at him. “Oh, by the way, I know Mrs. Austin isn’t there. I met her a minute ago on the stairs, and she kissed me and congratulated me. I say, who told her?”

"She heard my mother telling me, I believe."

"Oh, I wondered if Gilbert had. Do you suppose she minds much?"

"I don't believe she minds at all," said Frank. "Why should she? She told him she was very glad."

"I believe she does mind, though," Tiny nodded. "She was very fond of talking about old times."

"Rubbish!" Frank exclaimed; "you're as bad as my mother!" and he walked off, leaving Tiny happily convinced that it was impossible Mrs. Austin should not envy her the possession of Gilbert's love.

"Now or never!" he said to himself as he went slowly up the stairs. His life hung in the balance, his heart was beating fast, and every throb brought him nearer the decisive moment. He turned into a little room where Mrs. Leicester and Tiny sometimes sat. He would lie in wait for Mrs. Austin there, she must pass the door as she went down.

Frank leant against the window, looking at the dim undulations of the landscape, and vaguely recognising familiar points. It was strange to stand in that little room which he had known all his life—he could remember learning his lessons there at his mother's knee—waiting for his fate to come to him. At any moment it might come, with a quiet step, and the soft sweeping of her dress in the passage. Before a dozen more of those strong heart-throbs were over her eyes might be meeting his. She would look him in the face he knew, but what would she say to him? Frank had never thought less of himself than he did at that moment, and yet beneath all his anxiety he had an unreasoning faith in his good luck. Fortune had always been kind to him; people had always done what he wanted them to do. Yes, but Mrs. Austin was different. He dared not hope, and yet the mere thought that success was

possible flushed him like a draught of wine. Then she would not be Mrs. Austin but—Mildred; he would not have to count days and nights as steps towards parting, they would all be his, other people would come and go, but she would stay. When she said “home” she would mean Culverdale. On that last thought he dwelt with exquisite delight, as if he could hear her uttering the word. It was the wildest dream, yet in a few minutes that dream might be his actual life; that was the wonder of it. And was not fortune smiling on him already? He had been afraid of Gilbert South, he had had misgivings about Tiny’s troubled eyes, and now just at the right moment all his doubts and fears had vanished away, he was free to go to his love, and she was free to come to him. There could be no shadow of reproach or regret between them.

He heard her footfall in the passage, he called “Mrs. Austin!” it paused, and she appeared on the threshold of the open door. He had been expecting her and watching for her, and yet when she came in answer to his call he felt as if he were taken by surprise and had not a word to say. She stood in the doorway waiting for him to speak, and on her delicate lips was that faint half-smile which seemed to Frank to be the sum of all the poetry in the world. “What is it?” she said. “Did you want me?”

“Don’t go down for a few minutes,” he entreated. “I have something to say to you.”

She looked unsuspectingly at him. “Some other time,” she said; “I really must go to your mother.”

“My mother? Oh, she will wait a few minutes for me!” And, before she could speak another word, Frank, with eager eyes and stammering speech, was telling the story of his love. Even as he looked at her pale, startled face, before she had opened her lips to answer him, he knew that he had failed. And yet failure, now that it had

actually come, seemed so incredible that Frank tried to avert it by repeating what he had already said, as if every second which elapsed before she spoke was something gained. But all at once he stopped short, with a sense of the utter uselessness of any words.

"Oh, I am sorry!" said Mrs. Austin, meeting his eyes with a simple, tender sorrow in hers. She might have looked something the same if she had inadvertently hurt some dumb creature in the Culverdale woods.

"Don't!" said Frank.

"I never dreamed of this—never! I'm more sorry than words can say if anything I have said or done——"

"No!" Frank exclaimed. "You have done nothing wrong. If I'm a fool I don't know that it's my fault, but I'm sure it isn't yours!"

She could not help smiling, so gentle a smile that it could not wound him. "You must not think of this," she said. "It can't be. For one thing, you must remember that you are a young man and I am an old woman. You will choose better one of these days—you have your life before you." She added after a moment, "Mine is behind me, at least the best of it."

"Don't talk like that!" said Frank. "What do a few years matter one way or the other? I would be older if I could, of course." (He could wish to be changed, but he could desire no change in her.) "But I shall grow older," he said, trying to laugh.

She shook her head. "And so shall I!"

"If that is all," he exclaimed hotly, "it would be cruel——"

"But it isn't all. Believe me, Mr. Leicester, what you ask is impossible."

"I know I'm not good enough, but isn't there anything I could do? If I tried to get into Parliament—should

you like me to do that?" said Frank desperately. His hurried thought sought any possible advancement that might make him more worthy in her eyes. "I'm not clever, of course, but surely a man must be good for something if he tries with all his heart. Tell me what you would like me to do, and I'll do it!"

He stood opposite her: his face was pale and keen with excitement: he looked so roused, so manly, so earnest, that for one moment the thought crossed Mrs. Austin's mind that if fate had but sent Frank instead of Gilbert into that earlier life of which she had spoken, he might have become such a hero as she had dreamed. But it was only a passing thought. Something told her that Frank, as he spoke, touched the highest point of which he was capable. It might be that he too felt that at that moment the flood of passion and resolution reached its limit, but he believed that the wave, if not repulsed, would have force enough to carry him onward through the lower waters of his later life.

"I think you are good for a great deal," she said, "but that isn't the question. You must believe me when I tell you that I am very sorry, but what you ask me can't be."

"You are quite sure? There is no chance for me?"

She paused for a moment, looking at him. Then, as if it pained her to speak that last word, she answered with a little negative movement of her head.

The eager expression died out of his eyes and his face relaxed. "Very well," he said. "Then I suppose there's nothing to do but to say good-bye." He seemed to be making an effort to master himself, and Mrs. Austin looked aside at the window and waited till he should speak again.

"See here," he said, after a brief silence, "I shall tell my mother I have to go up to town on business this evening, but that I'm coming down to-morrow morning. 1

shall get away so without any fuss, and to-morrow I shall telegraph that I'm detained, and I shan't come back for a day or two."

"Yes, I understand," she answered. "This is good-bye. And when we meet again, I hope——"

Frank had taken up a pencil which happened to be lying on the table, dropped it, and stooped to find it on the floor. He rose with a slight flush on his cheek. "People don't always meet," he said. "Sometimes it's years first. Perhaps we never shall meet again."

"Perhaps not. That is possible of course." Mrs. Austin was a little puzzled by his manner.

The colour deepened on his face. "Well," he said, "why should we? If it must be all over, let it be all over!" He looked at her, crimsoning with the consciousness that he was saying something altogether unlike his ordinary everyday talk. "I would rather we didn't meet. I would rather say good-bye now. You understand, don't you? Remember me a little as I am to-day."

"I shall always remember you," she answered.

"And let me remember you as you are. If we chance to meet, why we must. But why should we? We never met till now. If it depends on me, I think we never will meet again."

Mrs. Austin looked at him with an expression which was at once startled and thoughtful, and a faint tinge of rose on her pale face made answer to Frank's blush. The entreaty, "Let me remember you as you are," touched her strangely. She knew that she was beautiful, but she knew also that her beauty was on the wane, and there was a melancholy pleasure in the thought that, though for the world she might grow old, for this one man she should always remain such as she was at that moment of farewell. She could not marry him, she did not love him, but woman-

like she did desire to be always young for her young lover. She desired it too for her own sake. Otherwise it seemed to her that the mere lapse of a few years might turn Frank's passionate devotion and her answering pity into a ridiculous joke. If she were a faded elderly woman and he a heavy respectable squire, would it be possible to remember without laughter that they had ever felt and spoken as they were feeling and speaking then? Why should not Frank have his way, foolish and boyish though it might be?

"Let it be so, then," she said. "If you like it best, we will say 'Good-bye' here and now." She looked at him very sadly. "I wish I had never come here."

"No, no!" cried Frank, with sudden passion, almost as if he thought that her wish could really take her sweet unapproachable presence out of his memory. "No; I can part with you—I must part with you—but I couldn't part with the time I have had."

"I feel as if I had done nothing but harm, and yet I can't help it," she went on, half to herself.

"How have you done any harm?" Frank demanded. "Because I love you, and you won't have me? Do you think"—this with an uncertain laugh—"that I shall take to drinking, perhaps—go to the dogs? After loving *you*?"

"No, I don't think that; but I'm sorry you should have wasted your love on me."

"It isn't wasted," said Frank, after a pause, gazing intently at the floor. "Look here, Mrs. Austin, I shall never, as long as I live, love any woman as I love you now. It can't be. One must have one best love of all in one's life, and I've given mine to you. But it isn't wasted for all that. If ever I marry, and you hear of it, you'll know that my love was better worth having than it could have been if I had never seen you. That isn't being wasted, is



it? And you have done good instead of harm—no harm at all.”

He looked up quickly, and saw that her eyes were full of tears. “I think she will be a happy woman who loves you and whom you love,” she said, half-turning from him. “And now good-bye.”

“Stay one moment more,” he entreated. “Let me have one last look. Remember, I’m never going to see you again; I want to recollect you as you are now.”

She paused with perfect simplicity, and faced him where he stood. He looked at her, turned his eyes away for a moment, and then looked back.

“It’s no good,” he said. “When I look away I see you as I saw you that first night, when they were playing, and you walked past me and were not thinking of me. I can see you so any moment I like. Or in the boat this afternoon—you were not thinking of me then either. Perhaps afterwards this will come back to me too,” said Frank, still gazing at her as if he would learn her face with its far-off compassion by heart. “Well, good-bye,” he ended, with something of rough abruptness in his tone. But even as he said it, in the bitter wrench of parting, the sound of his own voice jarred upon him with a sense of unfitness. “Good-bye,” he repeated, with the gentleness he had learnt from her.

“Good-bye,” said Mrs. Austin, and held out her hand, white and with a ring sparkling in the evening light.

He clasped it with the tender reverence which that last touch demanded. “I should like you to say ‘Good-bye, Frank,’ just for once, if you would,” he entreated.

With a faint smile of assent she said it very sweetly, drew her hand out of his, and went away.

Frank stood where she had left him, at first with feelings too exalted to be conscious of anything but her beautiful

sorrowful face, and the sudden blank of her departure. But as his excitement subsided, the gray light, which always finds its way from the outer world into a passionate sorrow, crept into his heart. There is nothing so dreary as the realisation of loss under its commonplace aspect, no longer as a blow, but as a lasting absence of beauty and joy in dull days to come, the foreshadowing of life's inevitable routine at the moment when it is unendurable even to remember that the days of the week will follow each other in their accustomed order. Frank hated Culverdale as he stood gazing out of the window. There were streaks of yellow and sullen red in the cloudy west, and it seemed to him that never since the world began had there been so ugly and cheerless a sunset. The wind was getting up, and there was something inexpressibly mournful in the shivering of the trees; and yet he stood there, looking and listening till the slow striking of a distant clock startled him from his reverie, and reminded him that he had no time to lose.

As he went down he paused for a moment on the stairs to make sure of his calmness, and, looking into the shadowy hall below, he saw the door of the drawing-room open, and Tiny come out. When she passed, a slim dusky figure, before a gray window, Frank could not have put the thought into words; but it was his turn to feel, as Gilbert South had felt, as if he saw his old life passing away with bowed head and lingering steps. "Tiny!" he called, and came flying down the stairs in his impetuous fashion.

"Yes," she said, and stopped short. She could hardly see his face in the twilight.

"Tiny," said Frank breathlessly, "I'm going away—I've had a letter. It's only till to-morrow—it's nothing. But I don't think I congratulated you properly just now——"

"Oh yes, Frank, you did," said Tiny, who felt that he must have congratulated her properly, since he had thought enough about it to accuse himself like this.

"No, I didn't, not as I meant to. I hope you'll be very happy, very happy, always."

"Oh yes," said Tiny promptly, as if her uninterrupted bliss were the simplest matter of course.

"Look here," Frank continued, "this is a sort of good-bye, because it won't be the same thing now. You'll have South to think of——"

"Oh, Frank, but I'm not going to forget you!"

"No, no," said Frank; "we've been something like brother and sister, haven't we?" He held her hand tightly in his, and looked at her through the dusk. "I don't think I ever kissed you, Tiny, even when you were little; and after all we are cousins, you know." She put up her face and kissed him silently. The remembrance of all their pleasant days at Culverdale was about them as their lips met—it was like a shadowy little world of meadow and copse and cornfield, garden and river, bounded by the far horizon of childhood. Both were conscious of that dim background, though Tiny's consciousness was only a half-sweet, half-sad regret in the midst of new-found joy. As for Frank, he felt that if South didn't make Tiny very happy—always—he should like to horsewhip him. And he would do it too! For Tiny must and should be happy, though he couldn't be.

## V

FRANK was at Tiny's wedding early in December; but he contrived, on one pretext or another, to be away from Culverdale during the greater part of the winter. He ended his wanderings, and arrived at home, towards the close of March. "Like the swallows," he said, as he took up his position on the rug and surveyed the familiar room. There was a little change in Frank himself; he looked a little keener, a little older, and he had learned to laugh a little, to himself as well as to other people, at things which could not be mended. He stood smiling and interested while his mother poured out her news.

"And I had a letter from Tiny this morning," she said. "The child seems quite absurdly happy."

"It's a good thing for you that she is happy," said Frank. "You are responsible for that marriage, you know."

"How can you say so? I'm sure I had nothing to do with it. I never dreamt of such a thing!"

Frank shook his head. "Oh, you're a terrible match-maker; there's no escaping you. If you miss one you make another. Where is Tiny now?"

"Rome. Would you like to see the letter?"

He took the flimsy sheets, and deciphered Tiny's dashing raptures rather laboriously. It was the same Tiny; yet not quite the same. There were pretty little

airs of authority, and turns of expression which showed that Tiny, who had never been very important before, felt herself something of a queen in her new life. There was wonder at novel sights and experiences—he seemed to see her wide brown eyes as he read—and a profound belief in her husband's perfection. Frank folded the letter and gave it back. He perceived that there was no need for him to start off to Rome with a horsewhip to secure Tiny's happiness. It was taken out of his hands altogether.

Having told her news, Mrs. Leicester began to make inquiries. Had Frank seen anything of the Stauntons as he came through town?

He had called there, and afterwards had been asked to dine.

"Well, then, what is this about Mrs. Austin? I had a note from Mrs. Staunton a day or two ago, and she said she thought I should soon hear some news about her that would surprise me. What does she mean?"

Frank looked vaguely in the direction of the piano. "It means that other people can try their hands at match-making as well as you."

"Oh! is she going to be married? I thought perhaps it was a sisterhood or something of that sort. Is she really going to be married?"

"Can't say. People don't always succeed with their matches, you know. But there's a man who admires her very much, it seems, and Mrs. Staunton is always trying to bring them together. It's a nice little amusement for her, I suppose; she doesn't seem to have much else to do, except drink afternoon tea."

"Did you see Mrs. Austin?"

"No," said Frank, still staring into space; "she was out of town."

"And who is this man? What is his name?"

She was informed that his name was Rowland.

"But who is he? Tell me something about him."

"Oh! I don't know. He's a middle-aged man—Fred Staunton pointed him out to me—getting a little gray."

"But you must know more about him than that. What does he do?"

"Breaks stones, I believe," Frank replied.

Mrs. Leicester looked so utterly astounded and aghast that he began to laugh. "Oh, don't be frightened!" he said. "It's all right. It all depends on what you do it with. He breaks 'em with a little hammer, and that's very respectable."

"Oh, you mean that he's something—what do you call it?—something geological?" she exclaimed, and was much relieved.

"That's about it," said Frank. He threw his shoulders back and stretched his long arms. "Upon my word I think I'd sooner do an honest day's work on the roads than go knocking off little chips of stone and writing papers about 'em. But I suppose he likes it."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Leicester mused. "I should really think it would be a very nice thing for Mildred."

"I should leave her to decide that if I were you."

"It must be very lonely for her as she is. I wonder when the wedding will be. Last time we gave her a pair of pink and gold candlesticks——"

"Did you?" said Frank. "Then don't do it again."

"Why, no, of course not. Well, I must think about it."

"If I were you, I'd wait till I knew there was something to think about," said Frank drily, and there was a silence, broken after a time by Mrs. Leicester. "I've got an idea!" she announced.

Frank looked round rather impatiently, expecting to hear of a wedding present. "I've been thinking," said his

mother, "wouldn't you like me to ask her to come down again before her marriage? You would—wouldn't you?"

He started. "No!" he said.

"No—really?"

"No," he repeated. "Why should she come? It was all very well for once, when you were matchmaking, but I don't want to see Mrs. Austin again."

"Really?" said Mrs. Leicester. "Well, you surprise me—there's no making you out, Frank. I knew you didn't like her at first, but at the end of the time I thought you were just a little taken with her——"

Frank's answer was an impatient movement of his shoulders.

"Oh, I was wrong, I suppose," Mrs. Leicester continued cheerfully, "but it was so. First I thought you didn't like her, and then I didn't know, and then I thought you did."

"Well, you were right once," said Frank.

"Yes; but it was very funny—I really thought you did. I don't mean anything serious, of course, but I thought, now, that if she had been a little younger—— Or that you would take a fancy one of these days to somebody younger, but that style, you know."

"Did you?" he answered, with a laugh. "Then you were wrong—quite wrong. I shall marry some time or other, but my wife won't be the least bit like Mrs. Austin."

"Well, then, my dear boy, I'm sure it was very nice of you to be so attentive just because she was your mother's old friend. I hadn't the least idea you disliked her as much as all that."

"Disliked her—rubbish!" said Frank. "You're always going from one extreme to the other." He turned round and stood with his hands in his pockets, and his head bent, staring so absently at the fire that his mother said smilingly—

"A penny for your thoughts! Come, they must be worth hearing!"

"Oh, I don't know," he began, rather sulkily; but all at once he laughed and looked up. "Here, hand over that penny," he said; "I was wondering how long it took to get over the measles."

Mrs. Leicester was much amused at the absurd idea, and gave him very precise information as to the time which had elapsed in his own case before his recovery was quite complete. "But I don't know that it is the same with everybody," she said.

"No, I daresay not," he replied a little vaguely. "But I suppose a fellow always does get over them some time or other, doesn't he?"





## LIZZIE'S BARGAIN



## LIZZIE'S BARGAIN

### I

THERE is a house in Lesborough High Street, a sketchy lath-and-plaster tenement, which looks squeezed and uncomfortable between its more substantial neighbours, like a bashful acquaintance entangled in the rapturous greetings of two old friends. It belongs to the Misses Fletcher, who consider it a very desirable residence. They ought to know it thoroughly, from the stuffy parlour to the cheerless attics, for they have spent all their lives in it, and they are no longer young. But to outsiders it has a starved and dreary look ; affording matter for curious speculation in the likeness between the tall colourless building and its owners. It hardly seems a fitting stage for any drama. It is too undignified for tragedy, too unlovely for brighter scenes. Yet within the last thirty years it has held, perhaps, more than an average share of doubt and despair, of hopes, dreams, and surprises, not much better understood by the Misses Fletcher than by the unconscious walls.

One January afternoon, seven and twenty years ago, the little parlour had two occupants. Near the fireside sat a woman, who, reckoning by years, should have been young, but who was faded, hopeless, and worn out. Her hands lay idly in her lap, and her eyes watched the slow dropping

of cinders on the hearth, or wandered over the coloured vases and the elaborate arrangements of shells which stood on the chimney-piece. Once they lingered on an oil-painting of Mr. Fletcher, Selina and Caroline's father, which hung on the opposite wall, and, for that moment, something of expression awoke within them. The picture was too big for the room, and the worthy ironmonger, for such he had been during his lifetime, seemed to prop the low ceiling with his head, while he leaned forward as if to look into his daughter-in-law's face. She stared defiantly at his regular features, florid complexion, and bland eternal smile, traced a likeness in brow and eyes to his son, her husband, and her lip curled. But her very hatred looked like querulous distaste.

Two years earlier she had run away from her home with Henry Fletcher. She was an empty-headed girl whose life had been made dreary by poverty and family pride. The Vaughans had great relations but the smallest of incomes, and Fanny's life was as rigidly ruled as if she were a princess, and as narrow as if she were a nun. She fancied herself in love with young Fletcher, and she escaped from the tyranny of her mother and brother to marry him. She had a vague idea that her handsome Henry was in trade, but she thought of something lucrative and general, of commerce and merchant princes. She made so little attempt to hide her disgust when she saw the Lesborough shop, that there were bitter words between bridegroom and bride within a week of their marriage. And she had not been a month in her new home before she learned that the death of a cousin had made her brother a wealthy man, and that, had she waited but those few weeks longer, her brightest hopes might have been realised. She bemoaned her impatient folly with lamentations as foolish, which, goaded her husband to outbursts of fury.

It is needless to say that Fletcher never became a merchant prince. He was extravagant; he neglected his business, his foreman cheated him, he took to billiards at the Red Lion, and went headlong to bankruptcy. His wife sat at home, crushed and listless, rousing herself only from time to time to write letters to her brother Ernest. She tried to make them eloquent and pathetic. She felt that she failed, and said so with heavily-dropping tears, which were in truth her nearest approach to eloquence. But it made no difference. The tear-blistered pleadings were returned unopened. The crash had come, and while Henry Fletcher went to London to seek employment, his sisters took in Fanny and her year-old boy. They did all they could to embitter this kindness by their spiteful and miserly ways, and Fanny, drooping by their fireside, irritated them by dull indifference. She took no heed, though Selina and Caroline were busy about the house, that January afternoon. Once only she leaned forward a little and listened, with a frown of vexation. There was a faint sound like a far-off cry.

"'Tisn't your baby—it's a child in the street," said a rough boyish voice. And a repetition of the sound proved the speaker to be right.

He was a lad of sixteen, who was at work with books and papers near the window. Mr. Fletcher had been twice married, and Theophilus was his son by his second wife. He was a clumsy, broad-shouldered, silent youth, who pored with lowering brows over his arithmetic, and when he half-blundered, half-swaggered into the room, seemed to take an unaccountably large share of it. Thorpe, as they called him, was always in the way. Thorpe's elbows filled the table, and there was no moving a step without falling over his legs. But he seldom took any notice. When he did talk it was in a loud voice, and he liked to

impress upon his hearers how much he despised gentlefolks, what rubbish Greek and Latin were, and what a good commercial education the boys got at *his* school. He would have his mother's portion, about eleven hundred pounds; and standing on the rug, with his legs well apart, and his hands thrust into his pockets, this big independent orphan would sometimes discourse of the fortune he intended to make. But as a rule he did his work, and kept his day-dreams to himself.

It had not seemed probable that there would be much sympathy between Thorpe and his sister-in-law. But it soon became evident that in his rough fashion he took a queer pitiful interest in her, though she hardly appeared to heed it. She made no answer when he spoke that afternoon, but threw herself back in her chair, while he resumed his work. Presently, however, she took a paper from her pocket, read it through, and turning a little as she sat, looked intently at the lad's bent head. He raised it and their eyes met. She rose, and moving with something of pliant grace, she crossed the room to where he sat. "Are you not going away to-morrow morning?" she said.

He nodded.

She laid the paper down. "Will you copy this for me? My brother is angry with me, and when he sees my writing he won't open the letter. But if you copy it he will begin it at any rate. And then perhaps he will go on. And if he does go on, I think—I hope——"

Thorpe frowned, and pushed out a scornful lower lip; but he took a sheet of blue paper, and with mutterings of "What bosh!" and "Pack of rubbish!" he copied the entreaties for a reconciliation in a fine commercial hand. She wrote a trembling "Fanny" at the end, folded the letter as if her very soul were between the pages, and slipped it into the lad's pocket with a beseeching smile. "Keep

it till to-morrow," she said; "he'll not know the postmark then."

"All right. I'll post it."

"Don't forget it," she persisted, standing over him while he twirled his pen in his big solid fingers. She had one hand on his shoulder, and the other lingered where she had put her treasure. "It's my last hope you have there by your heart, Thorpe. Don't forget it."

"I won't forget it," he growled, shrugging up his shoulder under her fingers. "Can't you trust me?"

"Yes," she whispered, and stooping with sad humility, the poor lady kissed his cheek. The blood rushed to his forehead, but he put up his hand and rubbed the place her lips had touched.

"I say," he remonstrated, "I wish you'd leave me alone. You make a fellow feel such a fool, you know." And he blundered out of the room.

When he came again to Lesborough, Fanny's hopes and fears were over. The big blue sheet of paper had come back sealed with Ernest Vaughan's signet-ring, and from that time she sank rapidly, and seemed to have no desire to live. She took no heed of her boy, and when her husband wished for some kind of deathbed reconciliation, she turned her face to the wall in petulant weariness, and refused to make the slightest sign. Her brief life was soon over, and her gravestone described her as Henry Fletcher's beloved wife.

He did not long survive her. He lost his situation, resolved to emigrate, and was drowned on his voyage to Australia.

Selina and Caroline were left with the unwelcome burden of their brother's child. Theophilus, making his way in the world, ceased to come to Lesborough. Time slipped away, and little Ernest grew from baby to boy, from boy to



youth, from youth to man, till he was within three or four months of his twenty-first birthday—a tall young fellow, with beautiful eyes and a querulous mouth. His life had been pent within that dreary house and the attenuated strip of ground behind it. This playground of his was a dull pathway leading nowhere. Like Ernest himself, it seemed pent and prisoned to the utmost limit of endurance; indeed almost beyond it, for at the end it bulged out suddenly to the right, as if it had made a desperate attempt to get away to the green fields. But it had been thwarted; cut off by a dusty lane, shouldered aside by a neighbouring stable, and the only result of the effort was an excrescence, holding two stunted lime-trees and some feeble boughs of lilac. A few wallflowers and Canterbury-bells forced their way through the hardened soil, and at intervals down the narrow borders were dotted dreary little bushes, sprinkled every autumn with minute and melancholy Michaelmas daisies. This strip of ground was called “the garden,” a comprehensive word, since it could designate Eden and this.

As a child Ernest had played in the corner which was safe from prying eyes. As a youth he haunted it still. He was sullen and shy, but there was something of grace about the lad, slender and eager-eyed, who dreamed over books and papers in his garret, or went with swift strides along the garden path. Most of all was that grace about him, when, reaching the lime-trees, he leant against the wall with folded arms and lifted face. For then at a window high in a roof across the lane would be seen—— No matter, Ernest knew, and the Misses Fletcher did not, and perhaps there might be a touch of Eden about the grim little enclosure after all.

Time had awakened no kindlier feelings in the sisters' hearts. Miss Fletcher was fifty-eight, Miss Caroline was fifty-five. Their days were spent in the practice of small

economies, enlivened by spiteful gossip. Year after year dawned on them in their unlovely existence, and left them exactly as it found them, except that they were the older by its age, leading such a life, so gray, so cramped, so unutterably mean, that the mere thought of it would overshadow young hearts with a horror worse than the horror of the grave. What had they to do with the dream which made that garden corner so fair to Ernest's eyes?

Just at this time he had leisure enough to lean and look, for his work in life was not yet found. He had been educated at the Lesborough Grammar School, and Mr. Markham, the master—a dreamy man, clever in a whimsical way, but curiously unfitted for the post he held—took a fancy to him, and kept him at a small salary to teach the younger boys. Ernest had no aptitude for the work, but he liked to be with Mr. Markham. So he drifted on till the master's sudden death left him stranded and helpless. What could he do? The Misses Fletcher made inquiries, and offered him a place in a draper's shop. He said he would starve sooner. They persisted, partly because they thought it really suitable, and partly because they found something spitefully charming in the idea of Fanny's boy behind a counter, when Fanny herself had so loathed her husband's shop. Sure of the triumph—for what could Ernest do but yield?—they gave him a fortnight to think it over, and see what he could find for himself; but the fortnight was slipping away, and he had done nothing. The thought of enlisting crossed his mind, but the remembrance of Lizzie Grey held him back—Lizzie whom he loved; beautiful Lizzie who loved him.

Day after day, as she came from teaching the children of a Lesborough grocer, she opened the little window, by which a poplar flickered, and saw her lover's lifted face as he watched for her by the lilac-bush below. Young as

they were, it seemed to them that they had loved for a lifetime, since neither could say when it began, and neither had so much as dreamed of any other.

Lizzie was very pretty. She was a tall, slight girl, with a wide forehead, wavy brown hair, soft red lips that were ready to smile, and eyes that were clear and true. It was easy to see that she was quick and self-reliant; in fact, Ernest leant on her rather than she on him. She was gently tolerant of his wayward melancholy and his jealous follies, but his day-dreams pained her a little sometimes. She could help him when he was despondent, but she felt as if she hardly understood the castles in the air which he would build on a hopeful day. Perhaps in her frank humility she thought his ambition nobler than it was. As for Ernest, he did not doubt for a moment that her desires were the same as his own.

It had been easy to deceive Selina and Caroline in the matter of his love. They would often ask Lizzie to tea, because she was a capital amateur dressmaker, and had ingenious ideas which would make their frayed and faded garments look as good as new. On these occasions Ernest would wear a lowering face, for he hated to see his love stooping over Selina's dingy finery, planning and turning, with pins in her mouth. But his aunts misunderstood his ill-temper, and chose to imagine that he despised Lizzie Grey, because her father, dead some three years earlier, had been only a superintendent of police. They lectured him on his sinful pride, and he heard them in sullen scorn. Consequently they would summon him to render her small services, to hold a candle, or bring a footstool, or take her cup. He obeyed in silence, and while they exchanged triumphant glances, he rejoiced in the exquisite moments when his eyes or hands met Lizzie's.

Ernest's final decision was to be made on the fifth of

February. The weather had been very mild, but it changed on the night of the first, and a black and bitter frost turned the earth to adamant beneath a leaden sky. The intolerable cold drove him from his garret, and he was miserable for himself and for his one pet. This pet was an old and hideous sandy cat, toothless, lame, and a very miracle of leanness, such a cat as one might see in a night-mare, but hardly anywhere else. Ernest loved it because one day he rescued it from some boys, who were stoning the helpless vindictive beast in a corner. The poor brute would follow him trustfully, rubbing itself against him as he walked in the garden. He never spoke of it, but he pilfered bits of meat for it; he crept downstairs and stole the milk, preserving a guilty silence when the milkman's character was aspersed in consequence. He was absolutely sick with fear lest Dorcas, the sour-faced maid, should catch him thieving. But what could he do? Even had he had money to spare he could not have bought meat and milk for Sandy without exciting suspicion. Already his aunts wondered why "that horrid cat" was so often about the place, and Miss Selina or Miss Caroline, perceiving it, would fly out with "Ssh—you nasty beast—you!" or Dorcas would pursue it with a shower of small stones, and the hunted wretch would scramble over the wall, turning at a safe distance to spit and growl in venomous impotence like a decrepit fiend. Ernest meanwhile stood by, fully aware of his favourite's repulsive appearance, but with disgust swallowed up in pity for its bleak and starved existence. Still he was sore, not because Sandy was ugly and malignant, but because he fancied it was ridiculous to protect an old cat. "It was his usual luck," he grumbled to himself. Had it been a dog there would have been nothing laughable about it, but he was ashamed of pussy scuttling over the tiles. Yet he was very true to Sandy.

Spending the evening with Mr. Markham, in his happier days, he had more than once refused to stay the night, only because the weather was wild and cold, and he could not bear to think of Sandy mewing the long hours through, and rubbing its lean body against the window of his empty room.

And what was Sandy doing in this bitter frost? Ernest wondered as he sat in the parlour with the local paper in his hand. He wondered, too, why his Aunt Selina's thimble and needle clicked at every stitch she took, while his Aunt Caroline's didn't. Only Aunt Caroline had a trick of sniffing at irregular intervals, and Ernest was not quite certain whether the regular click of thimble and needle, though it worried him almost to distraction, was worse than the horrible suspense caused by the irregularity of Aunt Caroline's sniffing. The two combined were maddening. Last time he counted nineteen clicks and then a sniff; this time he had got to seven and twenty—ah! thank goodness, there it was! Yet why thank goodness? For one, two, three, four, when would the next be? He muttered something under his breath, and felt that a man might do murder for less cause.

"*What* did you say?" Aunt Caroline inquired.

"I didn't speak," said Ernest, staring at a string of dreary little paragraphs.

"Oh! I beg your pardon! Singular that my ears should have so deceived me." And Aunt Caroline resumed her stitching with a sniff. The young man leapt to his feet and crumpled up the paper. He felt that he could not endure the stuffy little room, the stale Lesborough news, and Selina and Caroline, one moment longer, and he hurried away to face the rough east wind. He battled against it with angry pleasure till he was tired out, and the gathering dusk drove him home, to take up all his burdens again at the first

glimpse of that white house which he hated. But no sooner had he crossed the threshold than he was conscious of an unwonted presence within. A small portmanteau lay at the foot of the stairs, and an overcoat, which smelt of smoke, was tossed across a chair. The Misses Fletcher abhorred smokers. From the parlour came a voice, masculine in depth and power, and pleasant after the sisters' shrillness.

Ernest's eyes were bright with a scarcely acknowledged hope as he pushed the door open and went in. A big fair man stood on the rug, his head thrown back with a defiant air. His hands were thrust into his pockets, perhaps as a judicious economy of space in the little room. Selina and Caroline, surely leaner and more wizened than when Ernest went out that afternoon, sat squeezed against opposite walls, with their heads on one side, like mediæval saints in a stained window, and gazed admiringly at the stranger. There was a pause, while young Fletcher stared at the queer group, till the broad-shouldered central figure stepped forward. "So this is the boy?" he said, with a glance right and left. And the pair of meagre supporters exclaimed in a breath, "Your Uncle Theophilus!"

The light died out of Ernest's eyes when he perceived that the newcomer was not a Vaughan. He drew himself up to his full height, and bowed in silence. But Theophilus, with a laugh ignored the stately bow and held out his hand, while his quick gray-blue eyes scanned the lad's face. "So you are Ernest?" he said. "You were baby when I saw you last—you show one how the time has slipped away."

"Yes, I'm Ernest," and the young man gave his hand an impatient little twist. His uncle dropped it with an amused smile, and turning to Selina said, "He's like poor Harry."

"Oh, do you think so?" she replied with charming candour. "Why, Henry was *so* good-looking?" Thorpe laughed again as he looked at his nephew.

Ernest felt that he hated this man. Yet Theophilus Fletcher was far from ill-looking. He had lost the awkwardness of old days, he carried himself well, and his face, though not distinguished for refinement, might be called handsome. There was perhaps something stubborn and heavy about the lower part of it, but his smile was pleasant, and frequent too, for his former sullenness had been not so much ill-temper as an uncouth manner. Except that Mr. Fletcher was a little inclined to be stout, and that the strong auburn hair was slightly wearing off his broad forehead, the change in him was one of unmixed improvement. Yet to Ernest a fiend in human shape could hardly have been so distasteful as this sleek, shrewd, self-satisfied man. For Theophilus Fletcher had attained his boyish ideal; he was eminently commercial.

The little maidservant who helped Dorcas came in with a note. Miss Selina read it with an air of mystery, nodded to Miss Caroline, and went out. Ernest, going wearily upstairs, met her, and was informed that Miss Grey was coming to tea. He stopped short, and his angry scowl might well confirm her in the idea that he disliked Lizzie. "Have you any objection, pray?" she inquired.

"What does it matter?" he said in a half-choked voice. He brushed past her, and raced upstairs, furious at the thought that Lizzie—his Lizzie—should have been sent for to amuse a vulgar tradesman. He dashed into his room, scaring poor Sandy, who had crept in at the window and was crouching in a corner. His frenzy was over in a moment, and he caught up his favourite, fondling it with a patient tenderness. Lizzie would have liked to see the smile which lighted his dark face, and glanced, like sunshine

on sullen waters, from his melancholy eyes. He was unwilling to put Sandy down. And why should he? He was not going to take any trouble to do honour to Theophilus Fletcher. So when at last he saw fit to go downstairs he had done little to improve his personal appearance.

Not so the other. Whether on account of the coming visitor, or merely from his habit of neglecting no advantage which he might possess, Mr. Theophilus Fletcher had dressed very carefully indeed. Ernest, lounging in in his shabby morning coat, found his uncle looking very new and resplendent, and occupying his favourite position on the rug, while Miss Selina, in her Sunday cap, chattered about Lizzie Grey.

"A really charming girl, Theophilus; *so* pretty, and so unaffected—oh, you needn't look at Ernest—*Ernest* doesn't like her—her father was only a superintendent of police—very well for *us*, but not nearly grand enough for *him*, is she, Ernest? A duchess might do perhaps—he! he!—but a superintendent of police's daughter!—oh *dear* no!"

"No?" said Thorpe. "What, won't she have anything to say to you, my boy? When it's a question of a pretty girl nobody looks so savage for nothing, let her father be what he may. . What has this pretty Miss Lizzie done to you?"

Ernest's frown grew darker. "I don't know what you mean, sir, and I don't know what my aunt means. I don't find fault with Miss Grey."

The bell rang, and Selina flew out to welcome her guest.

"Nonsense, man, I was only in joke," said Thorpe. "You've lived with these solemn sisters of mine till you don't know what a joke is—and till you've taken to nursing their cats, I declare!"



His strong hand was on his nephew's shoulder, and he turned him round as he spoke. Ernest looked down and saw poor pussy's sandy hairs sprinkled thickly on his coat. "You are just the young man to live with a couple of spinsters, aren't you?" said Thorpe.

A step was heard in the passage, and for the first time Ernest voluntarily met his uncle's eyes.

"Don't say anything, sir—they hate the poor brute. They'd hunt it——"

"Then be off and brush your coat," said the other. "Their eyes mayn't be as sharp as mine—Caroline ought to wear spectacles, I know—but never count on a woman's not seeing what she isn't meant to see—mind that."

Thorpe, left to himself, wondered why his nephew should dislike Lizzie Grey. "Cooped up here with Selina and Caroline, he ought to be ready to like anybody. And what should a pretty girl come here for unless she likes the boy? No, no, either she is fearfully plain, in which case the women will swear she is charming, as a matter of course, or—which I strongly suspect—Master Ernest and Miss Lizzie are a pair of sly young hypocrites, and have hoodwinked the old ladies. We'll see."

And he did see how, when the young folks greeted each other with unmoved faces, their hands lingered for a moment as if unwilling to part. "Sly fellow," said Thorpe to himself. "He doesn't find fault with her—no, I daresay not. I wouldn't find fault with Miss Lizzie if she held my hand like that!"

The tea-party was a very cheerful one to all but Ernest. Even the sisters contributed what little they could, though it was of a feeble and acidulated kind, to the merriment. Thorpe tried to draw his nephew into the conversation, but, being peevishly repulsed, he turned away with a smile, and devoted himself to Miss Grey. Ernest looked on in angry

astonishment. If it were intolerable that Lizzie should be sent for to amuse a bullying overdressed tradesman, how infinitely worse to find her unconscious of her degradation ! Poor Lizzie ! She liked Mr. Fletcher, and had no idea that she ought to feel humiliated. She glanced at her lover from time to time as he sat apart, and thought that he looked like a prince in disguise ; but she was forced to own that her prince was slovenly, out at elbows, moody, and deficient in princely courtesy. Why did he repulse his uncle ? Why should not his life be brightened by the broad glow of Mr. Fletcher's prosperity ? And on Ernest's behalf she paid her innocent court to Theophilus.

Miss Caroline's spirits rose to such an unusual height that, when the table was cleared, she proposed to play cribbage with her brother, as she used to do with the schoolboy of twenty years earlier. Thorpe assented, but when the cards were produced, he could not refrain from a startled aside—"Same pack, by Jove !"—and for a moment his brow was drawn down, and his under lip pushed out as of old. This man had no reverence for antiquity, and took no interest in the memorials of bygone centuries. But he was strangely impressed by the accidental permanence of so perishable a thing as a pack of cards, and he cast a pitying glance at his sisters. His views of woman's rights and woman's needs were narrow enough. A woman should have a husband who would never lose his temper nor his authority, and who should provide her with a comfortable home, plenty to eat and drink, and a sufficiency of finery. But, as he shuffled the old cards, he woke to a sudden comprehension of the stagnant dreariness of his sisters' lives. Twenty years earlier he had left that house to work his way to fortune. He had known many changes and many men. He had thrown himself, rejoicing in his strength, into the world's swift current, and was hurrying

onward to success. And when he came back to his old home he found no change there, except that of inevitable decay, and no idea of amusement for the man except the pack of cards with which the boy had played. But Caroline was waiting for him to begin, and he had no time for further thought.

Apparently he had not become more skilful since their former encounters, and he soon leant back to show his cards to Miss Grey, as she sat by the fireside. While he dexterously balanced himself so as to bring his bold face and mirthful eyes very close to Lizzie, that she might give her counsel in a whisper, Ernest felt that he would cheerfully give all he possessed—not much, poor fellow!—to see the tilted chair slip, and tumble the self-possessed gentleman into the fender among the fire-irons. But it was not to be. And as Mr. Fletcher made outrageous blunders if left to himself for a moment, and Miss Caroline said, in a tone which was meant to be playful, “*I wonder you don’t look after your pupil better than that, Lizzie, I do indeed,*” the girl, after a little while, drew her chair to the table, laid aside her work, and gave herself up to the game. She had enough to do, for Theophilus cheated unblushingly before his adversary’s very eyes, and looked so coolly at Lizzie herself when he had rattled off, and was about to score, some astonishing miscalculation of his hand, that she could only reply with a glance of incredulous doubt, and, taking the cards from him, endeavour to point out his mistakes. But once in the midst of the demonstration she was suddenly aware of laughter lurking in his eyes, and, flinging down the cards she exclaimed, “*I won’t say another word—you know it all better than I do, and you cheat most abominably, Mr. Fletcher.*” But Thorpe explained how the truth had just dawned upon him, and he could not help laughing at his own stupidity. Lizzie shook

her head, but at last she relented, and looked at the hand which had just been dealt to him.

Presently Miss Selina hunted a black bottle of currant wine out of the cupboard, and called for a corkscrew. Thorpe begged her not to open it on his account, as brandy and water would do for him. She however persisted, and hospitably poured it out. Even then, though he was assured that, being opened, it might as well be drunk, he steadily declined it, declaring that when he said a thing he meant it, and that brandy and water would be quite good enough for him.

"Shall I see you home, Miss Grey?" he asked, when Lizzie, having finished her glass of wine, was folding up her work. "I don't know the way of course, but if it isn't very difficult, we might walk it two or three times, and I daresay I could learn it."

"Oh, Ernest shall go with Lizzie," Miss Caroline exclaimed. "It's only a step—don't you remember the white house across the lane?"

Thorpe did remember.

"I wouldn't have your escort for the world," said Lizzie gaily, as she bade him good-night. "I should be afraid that you might forget after all, and wander about Leborough all night, and be found dead of cold."

"Like a Babe in the Wood?" he suggested.

"Worse—no leaves this time of year!"

"Take a good many to cover me at the best of times, wouldn't it?" said Theophilus. As he spoke Selina appeared with the brandy bottle, inquiring if Lizzie was ready, and as Ernest was visible, gloomily waiting in the background, the girl went off in haste.

She had but a moody companion. He abused Thorpe Fletcher's appearance, manners, coat, ring, and Albert chain, until they reached her door. "How we have wasted

our time!" said Lizzie sadly, "and I have so little time with you Ernest."

"Let us go a little farther," he pleaded, in sudden penitence.

She shook her head. "They will notice how long you are. We mustn't run any risks."

He hesitated, but he knew that she was right. Glancing along the deserted lane, he took her hands in his. "Forgive me," he said. She smiled in answer, and, stooping, he kissed her fondly. Lizzie will remember that kiss to her dying day—the eager beautiful eyes which looked down into hers, the lips and hands which clung as if they would never part, and overhead the keen stars twinkling through the frosty air.

## II

THEOPHILUS briefly informed his sisters that he had come on a matter of business, and should stay some little time. He did not inform them that it was very possible that Lesborough might once more become his home. There was a large foundry about a mile and a half from the town, and he had learned that its owner was anxious to retire from business. He thought that he saw a much-desired opportunity for carrying out some improvements in thrashing-machines and steam-ploughs; and though he would not have suffered any foolish sentiment to affect his plans, he was glad that his opening should be at Lesborough. Nowhere else could he so accurately measure the height which he had reached.

As the days went by his prolonged stay became a source of perplexity to Lizzie Grey. She knew nothing about the business which detained him, but even had all the negotiations about the foundry been fully explained to her, she might not have understood why it was needful for Mr. Fletcher to haunt the High Street, day after day, just when she went to and from her teaching. Why did he watch her with such keen curiosity? And why did he try to conceal this curiosity under an affectation of carelessness, which apparently deceived others, though it could not deceive her? She was absolutely certain that he listened intently to every syllable she uttered, still with that same

assumption of indifference. At times he would be moody and preoccupied, but Lizzie knew that he was preoccupied with thoughts of her. Before he had been in Lesborough ten days she was thoroughly alarmed and confused. The High Street was full of Theophilus Fletcher, and she fled through it with the hurried steps and throbbing pulses of a hunted creature.

It was her solution of the mystery which frightened her. There are some girls who fancy that every man they meet is dying for them. Lizzie was not one of these, but she *did* believe that Mr. Fletcher was in love with her. The very idea was terrible, and sent a flood of crimson to her cheeks; yet what else could she think? How otherwise could she account for his pursuit of her, for the questioning glances which sought an answer in her face? More than once speech seemed so imminent that Lizzie held her breath in terror, and thought it miraculous that Ernest's suspicion had not as yet been aroused. Any moment might open his eyes, and concentrate his hatred on the man she had fondly hoped would be his benefactor. In fact his eyes must be opened before long, for even while she tried to keep Theophilus at arm's length, to avoid his glance, the touch of his hand, or to escape when she saw him coming, she felt as if she were knotting cobweb fetters to restrain some great thick-skinned animal, who would be unconscious of any bond. Not for one moment could she hold him in check when he should decide that the time had come. And when she had rejected him everything would come out, and Ernest's prospects would be ruined.

It was quite true that Mr. Fletcher had an interest in Lesborough besides the foundry. He had come to see what he could do for poor Fanny's boy. He said nothing of this to his sisters, who would never have understood his feelings towards his brother's wife. He hardly understood

them himself. He had thought her a limp, faded, foolish woman; he had seen no beauty in her, and yet she had awakened in his heart a pity in which scorn and kindness were curiously mixed; a contemptuous fidelity which lived when she was dead. Prosperous and practical though he was, there were times when he could almost have fancied that he felt those fingers, cold and dead a score of years, fluttering again at his heart, where once her letter lay. He scorned idle sentiment, which achieved nothing, but spent itself in vain regrets. Yet he, of all men, was guilty of this contemptible folly, since he could not forget his useless pity. But might not its existence be justified to himself, if, for its sake, he helped Ernest? He owned grimly that he did not think Fanny had cared much about her boy, but he supposed she might be different in Heaven. (Thorpe inclined to the belief that all women went to Heaven unless they were absolutely *bad*.) Let that be as it might, it was his only chance of doing anything for Fanny, and he took possession of the young fellow with a benignantly despotic smile. His determination was only strengthened by the scowling glances and sullen words with which his advances were met. But he had not to deal with Ernest alone. On the threshold of every scheme for his nephew's good, he encountered an unlooked-for difficulty. How should he attack it? He waited awhile, and tried to understand Lizzie Grey. Then swiftly his mind was made up, he snatched the earliest opportunity of action, and Lizzie found herself face to face with the moment she had dreaded.

It happened thus. She arrived early one afternoon at Mrs. Croft's, flushed with the excitement of having caught but a distant glimpse of Mr. Fletcher on her way. She was received with the news of a holiday for her little scholars, their grandmamma having come unexpectedly and taken them out. Mrs. Croft, however, had no idea of



losing Lizzie's services, and asked her if she would mind walking to a farmhouse about three miles off to give a message about some butter. No one could be spared to go, and if Miss Grey had no objection, as there were no lessons——

Miss Grey agreed at once, delighted to exchange the little schoolroom, which smelt of cheese, for the lonely road to Firwood Grange. In less than five minutes she was on her way.

"She grows prettier every day," said Mrs. Croft, looking after her.

"No need," said the grocer from behind his counter. "Prettiest girl in Lesborough now."

Mrs. Croft was right. Lizzie's face had been almost too placid, and the anxiety which might have made another look harassed and worn had only given her the charm of swift glances and varying expression. The prettiest girl in Lesborough had never looked prettier than when she started on her walk that afternoon.

It was an hour and a half later, and the February day, losing its brief gleam of mid-day gold, had grown chill and pale. Lizzie had successfully accomplished her errand, and was just starting on her homeward walk. She looked back as she closed the little garden gate, nodded a bright farewell to the farmer's wife, and turned into the road by a little plantation of stunted firs, duskily green amid the general leaflessness. She had a half-smile on her lips, for she was thinking how pleasant it would be if by a happy chance she should meet Ernest on her way, when a man who was lounging by a roadside gate, cigar in mouth, stepped forward and confronted her. With a sudden throb she recognised Theophilus Fletcher, and for a moment she halted; but escape was impossible, and she greeted him as calmly as she could.

"How d'ye do?" he said, removing his cigar. "Did I startle you?"

"A little," said Lizzie, trying to smile.

"I'm very sorry. But what a time you have been! I began almost to think you had gone by the fields."

Lizzie, thunderstruck, devoutly wished she had. "How did you know I was coming at all?" she asked.

He laughed. "Oh, I pick up some bits of useful knowledge about the town now and then. Croft told me."

Lizzie, quickening her pace, kept silence, with a desperate glance right and left, and ever the same consciousness of his eyes upon her.

"In a hurry?" said Thorpe.

"Oh yes! Yes, I mean, I am rather in a hurry."

"We'll walk a little faster, if you like," he replied, with thoughtful consideration. "You can't tire *me*." But Lizzie felt a despairing conviction of the truth of his words, and knew that any increase of speed was out of the question.

"Why, you're out of breath already!" he said after a moment. "I say, what's the good of racing like that? I want to talk to you."

"You want to talk to me?" she repeated faintly.

"Yes, I've something to say to you. What on earth do you think I came all this way for?"

It was coming, then! For one horrible moment the ground seemed to slip from under her feet, and the leafless trees to reel and sway. "I'm sure I don't know," she said.

Thorpe suddenly turned upon her. "What is the matter with you, Miss Grey?"

"Nothing," was the almost inaudible reply.

"I suppose you think I haven't got any eyes?" he said. It was the last thing Lizzie could think when she could hardly endure them upon her. "I know better. Some-

thing is the matter. Anybody been bullying you? Governesses always are bullied—aren't they?"

"No," said Lizzie. "Never mind me. Nothing is the matter."

"That means that something is wrong, but it's no business of mine. Well, you're about right there, I suppose. Only, you see, I came because I wanted a quiet talk, and how am I to have it if you can't look at me, and won't speak to me?"

Lizzie, nerved with the courage of despair, suddenly stopped, lifted her eyes, and looked him steadily in the face.

"I don't know what you can possibly have to talk to me about, Mr. Fletcher, but I'll listen if you'll say it."

"And take myself off as soon as I've done, eh? That's what you mean, isn't it? I say, I'm mismanaging this frightfully somehow. I never know how to make women understand things. I wanted you to be particularly good-tempered, and here I've half-offended you to begin with, and I haven't a notion how, upon my word I haven't."

"I am not offended," said Lizzie impatiently. "If there is anything you must say, say it."

He jerked the end of his cigar over the hedge, and pushed out his lower lip. "It's a difficult subject," he began, after a pause. "I lay awake half last night, trying to see what was best to do, and I made up my mind to have it out with you. I thought you were a sensible sort of girl, and I hoped you would take it as I meant it, though I am rather a stranger."

"Well?" said Lizzie desperately.

"It's about—Ernest," said Mr. Fletcher.

She started. "About Ernest! What about him?"

"Why, you young people have hoodwinked my sisters, but I can put two and two together—at least," with a knowing twinkle in his eyes, "it's enough to put one and

one together in this case, isn't it, Miss Grey? and I can see pretty well how the land lies, can't I? You needn't be afraid—I don't tell tales—*can't* I?"

Lizzie laughed and blushed, hanging her head. "I suppose you can," she said at last, speaking naturally and sweetly for the first time.

"I say," Thorpe exclaimed, with a sudden light of amused intelligence dawning on his face, "what did you think I was going to say that made you so fierce and cold just now—eh? Didn't think I wanted to poach a little on Ernest's manor on my own account, did you?"

"Don't, please! I don't know what I did think," said Lizzie, crimsoning in her intense anxiety not to blush.

He looked at her, and then laughed, not unkindly, except so far as any laughter was unkind. "A way out of the difficulty which didn't occur to me," he said to himself, and smiled a little as he walked.

They went a few steps in silence. "Look here," said Theophilus suddenly. The tone was so abrupt and imperious that Lizzie obeyed him literally, looked up, and instantly forgot her burning cheeks. The Thorpe of a moment earlier, who had chuckled to himself over her confusion, was all at once transformed, and it flashed upon Lizzie as she looked at him that he could be very hard.

"Look here," he said. "I came here to do a disagreeable thing, and I'm going to do it, and get it over. I don't like it, you understand. It was a good deal pleasanter talking nonsense to you a minute ago." Lizzie, though puzzled and a little frightened, wondered what could be less pleasant than the ordeal through which she had just passed. "But of course that makes no difference," he added, "and the sooner it's said the better."

"I haven't the slightest idea of your meaning," said Lizzie.

"Did you expect to guess it beforehand?" he demanded. "Now, Miss Grey, you and that boy have been making love over there"—(a nod indicated Lesborough in the distance). "I don't blame you, mind, it's natural enough. And I don't blame him, he had nothing else to do. In fact," he went on, gliding into a sort of monologue, "I could hardly have blamed him if he had done much worse. I ought to have looked after him long ago."

Lizzie objected to this view of her life's romance, and was opening her lips to speak some rather vehement words, but Theophilus came suddenly to the point. "I don't blame you, I say," he repeated, raising his voice, and looking directly in her face. "But I want you to give him up."

"Give him up!" cried Lizzie, wonder and scorn in her wide clear eyes. "Give him up!" She glanced incredulously at Fletcher, and laughed aloud; she could not help it.

There was not the faintest movement of his face, not the least change in his look. One would have said he had not so much as heard that involuntary defiance. Lizzie stopped abruptly, with a hurried glance over her shoulder, as if some ghostly echo of her own laughter rang in the air and mocked her.

"I want you to give him up," Theophilus repeated in precisely the same tone. "Twenty years ago I saw a woman die of a broken heart in the house where I met you first."

"His mother?" said Lizzie.

Thorpe nodded. His eyes wandered from her face across the desolate fields. "She used to sit by the fire where you sat that night. She didn't talk much, but she had a look in her eyes that would make your heart ache. My sisters don't mean to be unkind, I suppose, but if there were a prize for aggravation they'd get it, you know. (Not

if they knew I'd backed them, though. Then they wouldn't unless somebody found them out.) They used to worry poor Fanny, and I couldn't help her, but I said to myself that if ever I could help the boy I would. For her sake, not for his—wretched little baby he was, to be sure!"

Lizzie looked gratitude, defiance, and disgust.

"I did not forget him, though I put off coming," Thorpe went on. "I ought to have been here before this. The lad is getting his mother's horrible, hopeless look; he'll go mad, or cut his throat, among the lot of you before all's done."

Lizzie shuddered. "No! no!" she cried. "He is very unhappy, I know, but it is not so bad as that!"

"You mean to take care of him, eh? Well, I daresay you could reconcile him to a good deal. But how about the pounds, shillings, and pence, Miss Grey? When will Ernest earn enough for you to live on?"

"I don't know," was her reluctant admission.

"Nor I. Chances don't always come to those who are ready to seize them, and Ernest would stand and hesitate ever so long before he could make up his fastidious mind. But say he gets something to do—what then? Would he be happy, drudging all his life for mere bread, even with you by his side?"

He touched the painful doubt which lurked, almost unacknowledged, in the girl's heart. Ernest's love was enough for her, but was hers enough for Ernest?

"He'll never make his fortune," said Theophilus. "Strange how different men are, isn't it? If any one came to me and said, 'You'll never make a fortune, you are only fit to spend one,' I should feel insulted. Ernest would take it as a compliment."

"Very well," said Lizzie. "Suppose he doesn't make his fortune. I'm not afraid of being poor."

"Just as I thought," in a tone of patronage. "You are a couple of foolish young people, bent on ruining each other. Now I won't be a party to it. I might help him up the ladder by himself. That would be quite enough to do, for I couldn't know less what to say to him or make of him if he were a—a—a bishop in lawn sleeves! But as to helping him with a wife——"

"Mr. Fletcher," this very fiercely, "I don't want any of your help!"

"But, my good girl, how *can* I help him without helping you if this is to go on? Say I make him a clerk at the foundry. Won't he want to marry as soon as he has a hundred a year?"

Ernest had many a time talked of that sum.

"Say that I send him to college, and make a parson of him——"

"Oh, if you would!" she cried.

"Won't he ask you to starve with him as soon as he has a curacy? And won't he be in difficulties to the day of his death? I won't have it. Where should I have been if I had married at his age?"

"Why don't you speak to him, Mr. Fletcher? I'll set him free in a minute if he likes."

"Speak to the Man in the Moon!" said Theophilus. "Now isn't that like a woman's speech—sounds all right and fair, and not a grain of sense—when you come to look at it. Speak to him!—why, of course, instead of marrying on a hundred a year, he'd want to do it to-morrow on nothing, just to defy me. Speak to him if you like—you know as well as I do what will be the end of that. You will be very noble and self-sacrificing, he will be devoted and indignant, and I shall get my answer. The boy's as proud as Lucifer, and thinks me a vulgar tradesman. I don't see," said Thorpe, in a studiously mild voice, fixing

his eyes as he spoke on a clump of brambles a little farther on, "I really don't see that I am bound to *ask* him to throw my own money in my face."

This was unanswerable, especially as Lizzie knew that every syllable was perfectly true. She could imagine the defiant scorn with which Ernest would receive his kinsman. They came to the brambles at which Thorpe had been looking, and he struck out suddenly and savagely at them with his stick.

"But," cried the girl, looking up at the stubborn features which contrasted strangely with her blanched and quivering face, "do you know what you are asking me to do? Not only to give him up—to give Ernest up!—but to let him think me false,—to cast him off now that he is poor, for he must not know that the good fortune is coming, and that I am paying the price, or he will not take it. Oh, you cannot know what you are doing!"

Thorpe just opened his lips, let out "I know," and shut them closer than ever.

"Then I can't," cried Lizzie desperately. "It's too much. I can't. Mr. Fletcher, I can't!"

"Very well," he said. "That's settled then. You aren't angry with me for having asked you, I hope?"

His promptitude dismayed her. "No—stop!" she exclaimed. "Did I say I couldn't? But I can't ruin Ernest—let me try to think a moment! Mr. Fletcher, you must give me time!"

"As long as you please." He did not like his task; but his pity only pained him, it could not change his resolution. He had an unforeseen feeling that he was behaving like a brute to the girl at his side. What then? He was conscious at the same time of a certain brute-strength and tenacity which showed no symptom of failing him.

They were slowly ascending some rising ground, and



the wintry landscape widened round them. Theophilus scarcely saw it, but Lizzie's eyes swept the sad horizon, and something of its hopeless calm rose in her soul as she looked on the dying of that gray and bitter day. Still the lips which so short a time before knew Ernest's good-night kiss, were forced, by virtue of that touch, to plead for the love of which it was a sign. Yet there was a melancholy patience in her voice which made the very struggle a surrender.

"Mr. Fletcher."

He nodded.

"Must it be for always? If we waited a long, long time—years and years——"

Theophilus trod out the little spark of hope. Have those appealing eyes to haunt him for ever? Lengthen this painful half-hour to a lifetime? "No!" he said aloud. "Do you think Ernest would agree to wait for my consent? Besides," he added after a pause, "I have a fancy that perhaps one day the Vaughans may acknowledge the lad, and give him a helping hand. I hate his uncle myself, a fellow who could let his sister pine away for want of a kind word! But these Vaughans—for Ernest is one—are not happy with us, and we had better part company. Only for such a flight as that the boy must go free."

Another silence. "No offence to you," said Theophilus. "You're a good girl, I'm sure, and you're clever and pretty—uncommonly pretty. I will say that for you"—(he had the grace to say it in a sort of aside)—"and the Vaughans would turn up their noses at you, as if you were dirt under their feet. If you waited for years it must come to the same end. Ernest must quarrel with them, or part with you. Believe me, he belongs to them—let him go."

"And does he not belong to me?" cried Lizzie in her despair.

"Ah, that you know best," said he. "If you really believe he does, keep him."

But Lizzie felt, even as she spoke, that Ernest aspired to something different from what a life with her could ever be. How could she endure hereafter to see him a discontented spiritless drudge, and to know that she alone, of all people in the world, had stood between him and wealth? The sweet dream of life and love with Ernest would be marred if she held this secret for ever in her heart. Yet if it were told, would it not slowly sap, if it did not suddenly kill, his love for her? She looked up once more at Thorpe. He stood, tapping his boot with his stick, not looking at her, waiting for her decision, the incarnation of cruel common sense, immovable as a rock. She gave way all at once.

"Mr. Fletcher, you are right, and I will set him free. I will indeed! Only, can't you spare me one thing—must he think me false? Don't let him believe me so vile as to say over and over again that I'd be true to him till death, and then desert him like this!"

"Show me how, and I'll do it," said Theophilus doggedly; but he added under his breath, "if I walk a thousand miles for it!"

"Oh! I can't." She moved on a little farther, walking like one in a dream. Then, "It's all over," she said; "I'll do it—let him think what he likes. I promise—Mr. Fletcher, do you hear?—I promise."

"I hear," he said. But when he looked at her something in her face startled him. "I say," he hesitated. "You aren't going to—cry or—or anything, are you? Don't, there's a good girl, if you can help it. You've behaved so uncommonly well, you know."

"Cry!" said Lizzie, with intense scorn. "Cry! Mr. Fletcher, you don't understand. Girls cry for little things. Perhaps——"

"Yes, they do!" he assented with a sigh. Even in

her agony Lizzie noted it with bitter amusement. Had ever girls been fools enough to try to soften Thorpe Fletcher's heart with weeping? "But you needn't be frightened. I shan't cry now," she went on fiercely. "Tears wouldn't be any good, unless one could shed them of one's heart's blood, and die!"

"Don't!" said Thorpe anxiously. He had been like iron in the battle, but he felt feeble and ashamed now that his triumph had come.

"Suppose I break down," said Lizzie. "Suppose when I try to deceive Ernest I find I can't! What shall you say if I break faith with you so?"

This was business, and he answered promptly, "Nothing at all. Our bargain will be off, of course. You won't try to deceive me, not to mention that I am rather too wide-awake to be taken in by you."

"We shan't try," she cried hotly.

"I know you won't. I said so. But don't you think you run a greater risk? You've nothing but my word. Can you trust me?"

"Yes," she said, "I trust you." This man had been cruel to her, had coolly swept her out of his path; she knew little of him, and yet she felt that she could trust him utterly. And she was right.

"But what do you promise?" she asked, after a brief silence. "If Ernest refuses your help—what then?"

Theophilus deliberated before he made answer. "I can manage Master Ernest somehow, perhaps without his knowing anything about it. I won't consider myself free so long as I am—well—fairly well off, and he is poor. Will that do? Only let us make it clear what I do undertake. I don't promise that Ernest shall be my heir. He may be, I can't say. I may marry, you see."

"Of course," she assented impatiently. What did she

care whether Thorpe Fletcher married or remained single? She supposed there might be women in the world who would care to have him as a suitor. As to any property he might leave, she did not give it a thought. Waiting for dead men's shoes is a miserable occupation at the best of times, but he would need a rare gift of patience who should set himself to wait for the shoes of this man of seven or eight and thirty, who stood, strong, sleek, and healthy, by her side.

"But whether I do marry or whether I don't," said Theophilus, "I'll do my best to provide for him. I can't keep him in idleness, but if he chooses to take his chance with me we'll grow rich together. And if I'm not good enough for my gentleman, which is most likely, he can go into the Church. I suppose that will be good enough—even for his mother's son."

They were close to Lesborough, so close that, not wishing to conclude their conversation in the street, they halted on the old red-brick bridge, just outside the town.

"That is settled, then," said Lizzie, with a calmness which startled and almost deceived her companion. "Now, good-bye, Mr. Fletcher, and thank you."

"Don't see that you've got much to thank me for," was his reply. "But I won't forget you. If ever there's anything I can do, if you'll just let me know——"

"Thank you," said Lizzie, again with an intensity of scorn which he quite failed to comprehend. "*When* I let you know."

"I'm sure you deserve something," he went on, fancying that his offers of service were accepted. "You've been so uncommonly good and sensible about it—seen things in just the right light. There aren't many girls——"

"Thanks, but never mind the rest. I'm cold and tired, and I must hurry home."

"Shake hands on our bargain," he said, holding out his great hand with the ring on it.

"What need?" was her answer, eyeing it doubtfully. She felt a queer repugnance at the idea of touching his hand, as if it had literally thrust her away from Ernest. But he obstinately held it out, and she ended by allowing her own to be grasped and cordially shaken.

"One moment," said Fletcher, still holding the unwilling fingers, and bending down to look through the gathering dusk at the yet more unwilling face. "You are so quiet, I can't make you out. Look at me, will you? Are you going to break your heart about it? I daresay, after all, you know best—why don't you stick to him and throw me over, eh?"

"I hold you to your bargain," she replied.

"You do? Well—only take a moment to think it over, won't you?"

"Do you want to back out of it, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Oh, if that's how you put it, of course I don't," he began.

She tried to wrench her hand away. "Who is that—*Ernest*?" she exclaimed.

His eyes followed her frightened glance, and rested on an indistinct figure in the meadow below standing by the water-side, almost in the shadow of the bridge. It moved swiftly away as she spoke. "I don't know," said Theophilus. "Are you afraid of his seeing us? A little bit of jealousy might not be such a bad beginning, eh?"

Lizzie stared blankly at him for a moment. Then she crimsoned, tore her hand out of his grasp, and fled.

Theophilus Fletcher was left on the old bridge. It may fairly be supposed that he was triumphant; at any rate he was in possession of the battlefield, for through the wintry twilight was dimly visible a slim, graceful figure,

flying in haste towards the twinkling Lesborough lights, while another figure, also with his back towards the conquering hero, strode along the frozen river bank. The triumphant man stood musing a little while. Then, coming to himself with a shiver, he went home to the house in the High Street, had tea with Selina and Caroline, declined the cribbage with which the younger of the sisters seemed disposed to indulge him, and finished the evening with a double allowance of brandy and water.

### III

EVENTS sometimes plod so wearily along that one grows heartsick between them, but there are days when they rush to meet one another. So at least Lizzie thought when she had nerved herself to encounter Ernest.

He was very unhappy. His uncle's coming had driven him almost to despair. It was bad enough before with Selina and Caroline, but his home life had not altogether unfitted him to wage a womanish war of words, and they had no advantage over him, except the possession of their small income and the melancholy little house. But Theophilus took his stand upon the solid ground of his success, and was not to be conquered with words. In that feminine household it had seemed no disgrace to live from day to day in idleness; but his uncle's presence reminded Ernest that he too was a man, with a man's inheritance of toil. Since the first night he had felt that heavy hand ever on his shoulder, impelling him towards the destiny he hated.

Lizzie, timidly doubting what she could say to him, was assailed with a storm of reproaches. As in bodily pain Ernest might have bitten his lip, or clenched his hand, till the self-inflicted torment partially deadened the other, so his sombre irritation found some relief in making Lizzie a sharer of his suffering. For in his eyes she was one with himself, and he never dreamed that anything could part

them. His attack was not altogether without cause, for Lizzie's apparent friendliness with the man he hated most on earth made his burden heavier to bear. But, angry as he was, he did not really believe the insinuations he made. He could not seriously think that Lizzie was false to him. He had a show of right on his side, and, goaded to madness, he used the weapon which was ready to his hand. Did he not know that she would refute the accusation, and promise to have no more to do with the hated Theophilus?

Ten minutes later the pair stood with averted eyes, aghast and incredulous. Neither had ever realised the horror of the blow which had fallen upon them; they felt as two children might, if, being at play, they chanced to put out the sun in heaven. Ernest, instead of being caressed and soothed, had met with a swift and terrible reply, "If you think so meanly of me, we had better part." Even then he could not think she meant what she said. He shifted his ground a little. "Had he no cause for thinking so?" he demanded. "Cause!" she replied indignantly, while she struggled with the great lump which would come up in her throat at the thought of the pain she was inflicting. "If you are capable of suspecting me—and it seems you *are* capable—it is enough, and more than enough!" As she uttered the words she felt that fortune had favoured her marvellously. She was getting on nicely, she thought, and her heart was breaking. And Ernest remarked to himself, with a stab of despair, the intensity of the anger which almost choked her voice. "I have offended her for ever," he thought, and he answered in a mood as desperate as her own.

Not ten minutes and it was accomplished, this evil which could never be undone. No fullest expression of penitence, no passionate kisses of reconciliation, could efface the memory of this moment when they were two, when, though



their bitter wounds were aching, they stood apart in their divided lives. If Lizzie had not understood this, she must have thrown herself at Ernest's feet to ask for pardon. "But it would never be the same again!" she cried to herself. "It would be worse than if I had never listened to Thorpe Fletcher. It is too late—too late—but why did God ever let him come!" Too late—she drew herself up, and stood with lips compressed and downcast eyes.

Too late for Ernest also. He had gone so far that he did not know how to draw back. He would have given anything in reason—say all his life but just a quarter of an hour—to have undone the work of those few minutes and taken his love to his heart again. But he could not sacrifice his pride; so he too stood in gloomy silence, stunned, and vaguely thinking what a merciful thing an earthquake would be, or any peril that might give him a chance of springing to Lizzie's side to die with her. But the lane at the bottom of the Misses Fletcher's garden, with a bit of orange peel and a little wisp of straw lying in the dust, and its dead walls garnished with broken bottles, hardly seemed the place in which to hope for any startling deliverance. None came, indeed. Only a boy appeared, wheeling a barrow, and whistling "Beautiful Star." As he went by he looked up sideways, with impudent curiosity, at the lady and gentleman who stood so silently, a little way apart, and was so much amused that he trundled his barrow as slowly as possible, while Ernest scowled at him.

But at last the urchin's red woollen comforter, fluttering in the bitter wind, disappeared round the corner; "Beautiful Star," very much out of tune, died away in the distance, and the young man advanced a step and spoke.

"There's no use in standing here to be stared at, is there? And as I daresay we shan't meet for a long time, we might as well say good-bye."

Startled, she raised her eyes, and never saw the tremulous hand which was almost ready to be held out. "What do you mean? Ernest, are you going away?" And her heart beat with sudden fear, lest the lad should rush from the net which she and Theophilus had so benevolently woven for him.

"Very probably," he replied, with a faint flush of gratification at the idea of playing the part of superior coolness. "I have not, as you know, had time to make any plans, but I shan't trouble you long."

"Don't do anything rash!" she cried, "Ernest—don't!"

He looked at her in wonder, for he could not mistake the tone of passionate entreaty. Then, since she *did* care what became of him, why had she cast him off? Was it for Thorpe Fletcher?

"I don't quite understand," he said. "I'm not going to cut my throat or be found in the river—do you mean that?"

(The latter assurance especially was not hard to give. It might have been different on a sultry August afternoon, when the current was strong and cool between its reedy banks, with the eternal blue above it, and the burnished dragon-flies darting over the little pools. Ernest might have fancied then that he had strength enough to end his troubles, where it was smooth and deep beneath the old red bridge. But to push away the leafless bushes, to break the thin crust of ice, and to plunge, with numb fingers and chattering teeth, into the black stream which slid below—he knew well that he had not courage for that, nor indeed for any violent end just then. His chilly, languid frame shrank from the thought of blood, or poison, or half-frozen water.)

"No, no, no!" cried Lizzie; "don't speak as if such things were possible! And don't be hasty—take time to

think before you decide on anything. It's your whole life, you know—oh, take time !”

“You are very kind,” said Ernest, striving hard to preserve his lofty coolness. “I daresay I shall manage very well, thanks.”

“God grant you may ! Ernest, try not to be angry with me !”

“My anger can't matter much to you now ; and I hope other people will be pleased with you—as no doubt they will. What more can I say ?”

“You mistake me,” she said. “You are unjust to me !”

Was he unjust ? He turned upon her with sudden passion. “Prove it !” he said. His voice was changed, his very features were transformed ; he towered above her, prouder and manlier than ever before. “Prove it, and I will ask your pardon on my knees !” But he took her swift change of colour for the pallor of conscious guilt, and before she could even stammer “No, no, I can't,” in deadly fear at having so nearly betrayed herself, his face had relaxed, and wore its former look.

“I beg your pardon,” he said ; “I forgot we had settled that it was all over. I needn't stop any longer, I think. Good-bye.” He lifted his hat to her with stately courtesy, as if he were the proudest of the Vaughans, instead of young Fletcher, the bankrupt ironmonger's son, and before she could answer his good-bye he was gone.

Lizzie never knew how she got home, though she had a dim recollection of climbing the stairs to her room, and feeling as if the steps were multiplied by tens and twenties. Then she was lying on the floor, wondering why God would not let people die outright, when they did not want to go to heaven or anywhere. What was the good of dying if one could not sleep even then, but must wake and live again ! Oh, what a sham a quiet churchyard was, and

what a mockery a corpse's face! If she were dead her face would be still and full of rest, and all the time she would be alive somewhere, and if alive, then thinking of Ernest; and if thinking of Ernest, then, although dead, still crying out for death. So she moaned in her first misery, lying on the boards.

But after a time she sat up, pushed back the dark cloud of her hair which had fallen down, clasped her hands round her knees, and thought of Thorpe Fletcher. She had done her part, and he must do his; and he would do it, she was well assured, for he was true as steel. Her only fear was lest Ernest should decide on anything rash before Theophilus could interpose, and she would not suffer herself to think of this possibility. Her weakness left her no choice but to trust this man utterly. She told herself that she hated him; yet, as she sat on the garret floor, her only comfort was to dwell on his name, "Thorpe Fletcher," as if it were a tower of strength.

Her mother, calling from below, "Lizzie, are you ready? Do you know that it is nearly two o'clock?" brought her suddenly back to the world of fixed hours and afternoon lessons. She sprang to her feet and put up her hair with trembling fingers. The face which looked out of the dusky little glass was white, but very brave. The great clear eyes looked straight into the future, and saw a hopeless life of poverty. From first to last her one thought must be to pinch and save. She would grow thin and faded in her dreary round of teaching; she could never marry because she could not love again; her gladness was over, and all her bright days were gone. She would work for her mother; but in due time her mother would die, and she would be left alone. And after awhile there would be no Lizzie any longer, but a Miss Grey, with a prim cap and formal manners, trying to save a little for herself, and to

keep her old age out of the workhouse, by imparting her small stock of knowledge and feeble old-fashioned accomplishments to the children of her former scholars. Perhaps, when she should be altogether past work, if she were very fortunate, her little savings, with a little charity, might suffice for the needs of her frugal existence, and lay her in the ground when it was over. Hurrying to Mrs. Croft's that afternoon, she took the first step towards this life from which she so recoiled. If it had been only for a little while—but she felt so young as she ran down the street! So young that she was sure she could escape no portion of this dreaded fate. She would have time and strength to sound its every depth. She would live long years with it, till she gradually assumed the hideous likeness of her destiny. It was not the poverty she feared, but the Lizzie Grey who would remain when all was done.

#### IV

As the town clock struck three that afternoon, Ernest knocked at the door of a cottage where a jobbing gardener lived, who was employed at rare intervals by the Misses Fletcher. "Can your husband lend me a pickaxe?" he asked the woman who opened it.

The abrupt question confused her. "I don't know, sir, I'm sure," she said. "Won't you step in and speak to Clark? He's had a kind of a chill on him this last week, and to-day says I, 'Clark,' I says, 'you just stay at home and I'll get you some stuff from the doctor's, or you'll be reglar ill.'"

Ernest strode past her to where Clark cowered over a black kettle, which indicated the spot where a fire was supposed to be, and repeated his request.

"Can I lend you a pick?" said Clark, laboriously turning the idea over in his mind. "I don't know as how I can. Bill, you leave that poker alone." (Bill, who was thumping a saucepan-lid, kindly desisted for a moment, and sat on the floor, staring up at Ernest.) "Leastways I must have it back afore night. I've got a job to do to-morrow. Us poor men can't afford holidays same as you gentlefolks can."

"I'll bring it by six," said Ernest impatiently. "Will that do?"

"I don't know but that'd do well enough. But whatever do you want a pick for, Mr. Ernest? The ground, it's like iron with the frost."

"That's why I want the pick, of course," said Ernest quickly. He turned to Mrs. Clark, who had dusted a chair for him. "No, thank you; I won't sit down. I'll take it if you'll give it me, please. No, I won't have one of the boys bring it. I'd rather carry it myself, and I want it *now*."

He drew a long breath of relief when he stood once more under the leafless limes, where there was small fear of any intruder. The little maid had gone on an errand, Dorcas would not leave her warm kitchen, Aunt Caroline, too, would have hesitated for an hour before she ventured out in such bitter weather, Aunt Selina was nursing a swelled face over the parlour fire, and, most important fact of all, Theophilus had been summoned to town by a telegram, and would not return till the next day. Ernest might go fearlessly to work. A spade lay where he had flung it in anger at its uselessness, and pussy blinked sleepily in the most sheltered corner. Ernest began his task with vigorous, if unskilful strokes. Cold as it was, he was soon glad to strip off his coat, which made a nest for Sandy, while he resumed his work with redoubled energy, striking fiercely at the hard earth. Since he parted with Lizzie he had weighed every word she had uttered. When she answered him indignantly, he had been sure of his own injustice. When she betrayed her sudden confusion, he had doubted. Since he had been left to himself he was sure of her guilt. "She saw I should never do any good, and she's right—I never shall. There he was, paying her attentions; a rich man, who could make her mother and her safe and comfortable for life; and, naturally enough, she is ready to take him." Ernest stopped aghast. Was he thinking thus

of *Lizzie*? "I'd have killed any fellow who hinted half as much a week ago!" he thought.

He judged Theophilus and acquitted him. "He acts after his kind—that's all. He doesn't know what she was to me, and he's just the man to amuse himself with a pretty girl. He's busy now; but he'll remember her as he comes from town to-morrow, and smile his sleek smile, and cross his legs, and think how well he sees through her, and how pretty she is, and—oh, *Lizzie*, *Lizzie*, why weren't you true to me! I was a poor sulky brute, and I was rough to you often, but in my heart of hearts I worshipped you! Poor girl, she is sorry for me, I know. Perhaps she thinks that one of these days she will sit on Thorpe Fletcher's knee, and put her arm round his neck, and coax him to do something for poor Ernest. And poor Ernest will take whatever is given him, of course! No; I think we're neither of us quite so poor—are we, Sandy?—as to take anything from *Lizzie* Grey. I know a better way than that—don't I?"

He had planned his own future easily enough. Never again, if he could help it, would he see *Lizzie* or Thorpe. He would leave *Lesborough* that night, and enlist on the morrow. But he had not forgotten his poor old favourite. It should not be starved and stoned when he was gone; it should not even, in some groping way, miss the little kindness its dreary life had known. The air resounded with his ringing strokes as he toiled at his final provision for Sandy. It might be absurd to spend so much thought on his cat, just when he had lost his love and all his hope; but Ernest looked as tragic as if the grave were for *Lizzie* herself instead of the wretched animal which sat licking its paws and washing its ugly face. And in truth he meant to lay something of the past in it. He had always been sure that his cat would be petted for his sake, and the



grave was to be a token for ever that he would rather trust aught that he loved to its keeping than to Lizzie's.

Presently Sandy drew himself up into a hideous arch and mewed.

"You're hungry, poor old fellow!" said Ernest, rubbing softly under the skinny chin outstretched to court his caresses. "And I've nothing for you—nothing, Sandy! but very soon it won't matter; and I rather think you'll be the best off, after all. Only I don't like this murderous sort of mercy. If you could only understand! But to be in the dark, and to be helped *so*—oh, Sandy, poor old Sandy! I do hope I shall manage to do it so quickly that you won't have time to know that it is I!"

A snowflake fell upon his hand, the herald of a multitude flickering slowly down. He looked up, saw the lilac-boughs stirring uneasily against a threatening sky, and accomplished the brief remainder of his task in haste, while the storm whirled round him. It was all over, the deed was done, and the young fellow, feeling very like a murderer, was stamping the earth down again, and trying to efface the traces of his work, when through the eddying flakes came a peevish cry, "Ernest! Ernest! Are you out there, Ernest?"

"Coming!" he cried with unwonted alacrity, for he did not want any one to come to him. "Coming directly!" He gave a final touch to the ground, thrust his tools aside, and catching up his coat, he struggled into it as he ran.

Miss Caroline eyed him with sour curiosity. "What's the matter with you?" she said. "Here's a letter come by the second post, who on earth is it from?"

Letters were not plentiful with Ernest. He opened this one, read it, and uttering a curious inarticulate cry, he caught at the doorpost to steady himself. For a moment all things vanished in a sudden haze. Then he seemed to

see Aunt Caroline, with open mouth and startled eyes, swimming in the mist, and clutching feebly at him.

"Dorcas! Selina! What has come to the boy?"

The tone brought them both—Dorcas wiping her hands on her apron, and Miss Selina muffling her swelled face in a shawl. Ernest had recovered himself a little, and stood up in the midst of the wondering group.

"It is good news!" he began. "At least—no!" drawing a hasty veil of propriety over the bare selfishness. "I mean it is good for me, though it is very sad. My uncle, Mr. Vaughan, has been drowned yachting in the Mediterranean, with his only son."

"And you'll have some money?" cried Miss Selina.

"The estate—Southdale. At least so I understand it."

"Southdale!" The sisters looked at each other in awe; they had heard of the glories of Southdale. "Let me look!" said Aunt Selina, gasping for breath. Ernest resigned the letter, and the spinsters' faded faces jostled each other over the wonderful tidings. Sudden transformations are not confined to fairy tales and pantomimes, as we are prosaically wont to believe. When the Misses Fletcher looked up from that magical page, there stood before them, where their sullen slouching nephew had been but a moment earlier, a tall aristocratic young man, carelessly and even meanly dressed, it is true, but betraying his rank in look, and word, and distinguished ease of manner. "Oh, Ernest, my dear boy, what a happy day this is!" cried Miss Selina, and offered him her best cheek to kiss; while Miss Caroline fondled one of his hands in her skinny fingers. "Oh, what a happy day!" she echoed.

"Isn't it?" said Ernest. He drew himself up and away from Miss Selina's caress, and she could only fasten herself on his other hand. "Isn't it a happy day? Does

any one know whether there is a Mrs. Vaughan? What do you suppose she thinks of it?"

"Since Providence has ordained it, we will hope she sees that it is her duty to be resigned," said Miss Selina.

"And I daresay she is well provided for," Miss Caroline interposed.

"That would make resignation easier, no doubt," said Ernest. "Do you think a good example would help her at all? Because I feel quite resigned to my fate, and shall be happy to set her one. You would be sure of the wisdom of Providence if you were in my place, wouldn't you, Aunt Selina? I must show myself worthy of being your nephew."

"That I am sure you will do," she said warmly.

"Are you really? Quite sure? And Aunt Caroline too?" (She was testifying delight by rapturously worrying his hand.) "How should I begin?" He looked from one to the other with a sneer. "By being grateful to—Providence, that when the yacht went down my uncle was on board? Oh! and do I add a special thanksgiving because my cousin went down with him?"

"My dear Ernest!" she hesitated, "I am not sure that I would put it so, exactly."

"Ernest is a little excited and can't be expected to pick his words just now," exclaimed Miss Caroline. She turned to Dorcas. "Of course Mr. Ernest is a little excited, it's only natural, isn't it, Dorcas?"

Dorcas had rapidly decided that she had nothing to hope from Ernest. The bitter dislike between them had been the growth of years. "No use my trying to smooth him down now, he won't stand it," she thought, so she answered sourly. "Well, Miss Caroline, that sort of talk may come natural to Mr. Ernest—seemingly it does—but I call it downright wicked—so there!"

Ernest wrenched himself away from his aunts, and

grasped her hand. "And you call it just what it is," he said; "it's the truest word you ever spoke, old Dorcas, and God knows I'm sorry for the poor lady!" (As it happened Mr. Vaughan had been five years a widower.) Dorcas stood utterly confounded, having merely followed the instinct which led her to say the most disagreeable thing she could. Golden possibilities flashed before her eyes, but she had no idea how she had pleased Mr. Ernest, nor what she ought to do for the future.

"Now mind," said the young master sharply, "not a word about this till to-morrow—not a syllable to any one. My affairs shan't be chattered about in this gossiping hole till I am well out of it."

"Oh no! Of course not!" said the sisters, with blank disappointment on their faces. And Selina added, "You mean to go to-morrow then?"

"First train. Don't you see this man says they'll meet me? If it weren't for that I'd go to-night."

"Oh, Ernest!" moaned Aunt Caroline, "is it too much to spend one more evening in your old home before you leave it for your splendour?"

"You will go before Thorpe gets back!" cried Selina in dismay.

"Well, you don't suppose I should stop for *him*!" said Ernest. "If I were going to start as an ironmonger he might be some good. He wouldn't exactly help me in starting as a gentleman!"

The sisters quite agreed with him in this estimate of Thorpe, and Selina felt rather ashamed of having mentioned him at all.

Ernest's remembrance of that evening is like the remembrance of a dream, where vivid clearness wars with as vivid a sense of unreality. He had that dreamlike feeling of central loneliness with which the sleeper sees a

stream of fantastic changes eddying round him, while he is himself unchanged. The spinsters' fond caresses were grotesque and hateful as a nightmare. But the time came at last when he could escape from their tearful enumeration of his many virtues, and take refuge yet once more in his garret. He had to pack, he said.

His packing did not take him long. He put a few clothes into a little portmanteau, adding to them one or two trifles which had belonged to his mother, and a couple of books which Mr. Markham had given him. Then he stood looking at a faded rose, some morsels of coloured sewing silk, and a torn scrap of paper with fragments of words pencilled on it in a dashing hand. Gifts from Lizzie he had none. Once, in the first bloom of his passion, he had declared that true love had no need of such tokens, and Lizzie had revered the chance utterance as a sacred law. But later Ernest himself had felt a natural longing for some remembrance of her, and had hoarded these things for her sake. He eyed them a moment, crushed them in his hand so that the dry rose crumbled into innumerable fragments, and opening his fingers, let them drift to the floor and lie there. The act was emphatic. There is a certain tenderness in burning such things. You will treasure them no longer, but at least they shall be safe from insult. Though love may be dead, no unkindly hand shall be laid upon the corpse. But Ernest left the memorials of his first dream to Dorcas and the dust-hole.

He flung himself on his bed, and tried to realise his altered fortunes. But it was too bewildering. A gulf had suddenly opened to part him from his former life, and Selina, Caroline, Theophilus, nay, Lizzie herself, stood on the farther side. The idea of her faithlessness glided past him in the strange procession of events, and seemed natural enough in the universal change. So, between sleeping and

waking, the night wore away, till the Lesborough clock struck five, slowly as if it were a knell. Ernest suddenly remembered that Clark was going to work that morning and would want his tools. It was a curious fact that nothing was changed for Clark, and that he was still doomed to toil with the pickaxe which Ernest had borrowed in a previous existence, and omitted to return. It set bounds to the stupendous transformation which had absorbed the young man's thoughts. He perceived that he was not the centre of the universe, and was somewhat sobered and saddened in consequence. And he also perceived that he had broken his word. After lying for a few minutes, meditating on these things, he sprang up and hurried on his clothes in the dark, for his candle had long since died in the socket. "He can't go to work before six," he said to himself. "I have time yet," and he felt his way downstairs, unbolted the door, and stepped into the garden.

It was cold but very still. There was no breath of wind nor any sound of life. After a minute, when his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he distinguished the line of the wall, and guided himself by that till he turned the corner, trod on a roughened spot, and knew that he had reached Sandy's grave. He knelt on one knee to feel for his tools, and having found them, he lingered, laying his hand on the cold earth, as if he caressed his dead favourite. "Good-bye, old Sandy," he said softly; "if I had only known, you should have feasted like a king, old fellow; but it's too late. Only last night, Sandy, you came to me, mewing to be let in——" As Ernest spoke he chanced to look up, and the words died on his lips. Overhead a lamp in a garret window burned like a great star in the blackness, girding a leafless poplar with a band of yellow light. The world slept, but Lizzie shared his vigil. He knelt for a moment, gazing upward. Then he

started to his feet and spoke under his breath, lifting his hand towards the far-off brightness.

"If I have judged wrongly—if I have misunderstood—I dare not think it, but *if* I have—God give me a chance to make amends! If she marries Thorpe Fletcher I shall know that I was not mistaken. If not, I will come back some day, we will stand face to face, and this miserable mystery shall be cleared up. Till then, good-bye, my Lizzie, if by any wonderful chance my Lizzie still lives." He stamped in sudden anger on the hardened ground. "As if I didn't know it is impossible! Shall I come back and ask to be fooled a second time?" He turned to go, but memories of the moments he had spent there, of the beauty which was his life's one charm, of the love which never failed him till that fatal day, conspired to hold him back. He looked over his shoulder at the window, across which a shadow moved. "I will wait three years!" he vowed. "I will not speak for three years. But then—then—Lizzie!" He made his vain resolve with the fervour of boyish certainty, he meant every syllable of it, he was ennobled by his victory over his bitter pride. How could he realise that the next three years might be a new lifetime, and that before they were over, Lizzie, and Lesborough, and this passionate promise of his, might be but faded memories of a past to which he could not return?

## V

WHEN Theophilus arrived that same morning, intending to electrify the household with a little paragraph out of his penny paper, he found the household electrified already, and Ernest gone. He was not at all disconcerted, and merely said he would have some luncheon. Miss Caroline presided over the meal, in a frenzy of impatience, certain that Selina was carrying the great news round Lesborough, while she was answering Thorpe's leisurely questions, and watching every mouthful he ate. She felt that Fate was cruel, and found her only comfort in the reflection, "How bad Selina will make her swelled face, to be sure, going out in this east wind!"

Thorpe dwelt complacently on the thought that Mr. Vaughan, who disowned his sister because she married the ironmonger, had got the ironmonger's boy for his heir. Then he remembered Lizzie, and smiled to himself. "No need for her to trouble herself about our bargain now. He'll be true to her, I think—he ought to be kicked if he isn't—a girl like that! She deserves her luck—she's one in a thousand!" Later in the afternoon, when he had ended his meditations, and rested awhile in pleasant drowsiness, he looked at his watch, sprang up hastily, and went out, hoping to meet Miss Grey.

He did meet her, and stopped short. This was not the flushed, excited, triumphant girl he had expected to see.



She was pale and cold, and held out her hand to him with a quiet smile. "I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Fletcher," she said.

"Is it possible—haven't you heard?" he began.

"About that poor Mr. Vaughan? Yes, Miss Selina told me this morning."

"*Selina!* Didn't Ernest tell you himself?"

She shook her head. "Ernest will never tell me anything more. We had a difference yesterday. It is all over."

Thorpe stood aghast. "You kept your word then!" He whistled softly, then finding that she only looked at him in silence, he recovered himself with a laugh. "Rather a complication!" he said. "We were a little too quick, eh? But we must set all that right, you know."

"I thought you would say that."

"Of course I say so. That was what you wanted me for?"

They were at Lizzie's door. "Please come in—I won't keep you long," she said, and he followed her into a fireless and only partially-furnished room. The low ceiling made it oppressively sad, and it was very cold. Thorpe shuddered in his thick coat, and felt as if Lizzie had ushered him into his sepulchre. She glanced at the desolate hearth. "I'm sorry we have no fire. Won't you sit down?"

"It doesn't matter—no, I'd rather stand, thank you." He rested his arm on the chimney-piece as he spoke, and looked curiously at her. Why was her face so white and still?

"How will you set everything right, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Oh, leave that to me—I'll see about it—don't be afraid," he said with a slight swagger in his tone. But it ended in a shiver. "Miss Grey, I hoped you knew me better than to think I'd leave you in the lurch."

"I didn't think it for a moment. I knew you wouldn't."

He advanced a step. "Well, what on earth makes you look so miserable then?"

"How will you set everything right?" she repeated, fixing her eyes on his as she drew back.

"How? I shall go to Ernest, tell him my plan, and the bargain I made with you—I'll take care he understands how uncommonly well you behaved—and I'll either bring him back, or a letter saying he isn't far behind it. That'll do, I think?"

"Thank you. Now listen to me. I forbid you to say one word about me to Mr. Ernest Fletcher—mind, not one word. If you do, I will never forgive you as long as I live."

He was not surprised, for he believed it was the proper thing for girls to be romantic and high flown. Of course it meant nothing. She was a nursery governess, and Ernest had thousands a year. He looked her coolly in the face and smiled.

"And if I didn't, Miss Grey, I should never forgive myself. On the whole, I fancy that might be the worst. Don't think I make light of your anger, it will be very terrible, no doubt, but I must bear it as I have borne a good many things; and as Ernest is not particularly fond of me, I'm not likely to see much of you in future—am I?" He spoke in an easy tone, and waited for her answer. He expected a little more apparent reluctance. It was very foolish, but he felt that he owed her a patient hearing.

"You will go to him in spite of me then?" she said.

He nodded. "Rather well put," he thought. "I reply 'Yes.' She shrugs her shoulders—the matter is taken out of her hands. *She* has not asked the young man to come back to her, and of course she is not answerable for what *I* insist on doing. I call that neat." But as he looked at her with smiling decision, it suddenly struck him that there

was a strangely resolute look in Lizzie's eyes. Could there be some earnest in the sham fight? He hurried up an argument.

"What do you take me for, Miss Grey, to ruin your prospects, when I can't fulfil my share of the bargain? Remember, I can do nothing for Ernest now."

She answered swiftly, "When we were walking home *that day*, you said Ernest would never be happy here, but that if he went to his own people he must go alone. You meant it, I suppose?"

"Ah, but that was different. He would have had his uncle to please. Now he has only himself."

"Isn't he to have any friends then? Was Mr. Vaughan the only man in the world who would have looked down on me? Say, if you can, that it would not be better for Ernest to be free. Ah! you cannot!"

Why would she force the unwelcome truth from him? "Let Ernest decide that," he said.

"He can't. If you tell him, you will compel him to come back. No, for his sake it is best as it is. We have served him," this with a dim smile, "though not quite as you meant."

"But for your sake?"

"For my sake you must be silent." She advanced a step, and looked up into his perplexed face. "Mr. Fletcher, if I were your sister, would you go and ask a man to come back to me the day after he came into a fortune? You know you wouldn't, you would be too proud, you would die sooner. Oh, can't you understand that even I am too proud for that!"

"You mustn't sacrifice yourself to your pride," he said, for justice impelled him to take her part against herself and his nephew. "Ernest could only love you the better for what you have done."

"For the first moment—yes. But he would soon think, 'She *could* give me up—for my sake, no doubt—still she *could* give me up when I was poor, and she found she could not as soon as I was rich.' No, I should die of shame. It is best as it is. I know that I am not fit for him, and you know it too. You must keep my secret."

He stood silent and perplexed. He no longer questioned her sincerity, but might she not repent?

"You won't give me your word? Very well, then I give you mine, that I won't listen to him if you bring him back. You will have betrayed me for no good. You know whether I mean what I say, and when I gave him up I gave him up altogether."

"If he comes of his own free will?"

She smiled a little. "We will talk of that when it happens, or the day after doomsday, if you like. He will not come. He used to want me," her voice quivered as she said it, "but he will not want me now."

In his heart Theophilus perfectly agreed with her. Pride and temper would assuredly keep Ernest away till he had had time to appreciate his new position, and then there was little chance of his return. And for that very reason he was anxious that Lizzie should think well before it should be too late. "You are sacrificing yourself," he said.

"Not now," she answered. "That was done and finished when we were on the bridge. You are only asking me to undo it."

Giving up the master of Southdale appeared to Thorpe widely different from giving up a sulky lad, who was too fastidious to work for his living. He stared at the fender, drawing down his brows in a heavy frown. The engagement would no doubt be an undesirable one for Ernest, whose feelings and ideas would naturally alter, and who

would find himself bound to his boyish love when nothing else of his boyhood remained in him. Such marriages were seldom happy, people said, and Ernest was one who would be ashamed of his wife's lowly origin, and who would live in uneasy apprehension lest she should betray it by word or look. It *would* be a mistake, Thorpe was sure of it. Lizzie herself said the same, and refused to call her lover back. Then why should he go out of his way to injure poor Fanny's boy, and bring about this perilous marriage?

But this girl—was she to toil her whole life through, while young Ernest spent his uncle's fortune? She had given up all for his sake—was he to go away, rejoicing in his escape from the scheming woman who had outwitted herself in jilting him? And Théophilus himself—should he turn on his heel, not one farthing the poorer for that bargain of theirs, and leave her despoiled of all? God forbid! Thorpe's sturdy sense of justice cried out, and deep down in his heart there woke a new and strange feeling of wonder, of reverence, of something for which he knew no name. Had he not been so abominably cold that all energy was chilled out of him, it seemed to him that he might have risen to the occasion, and known what to say and do. But though Lizzie faced him calmly, Théophilus was shivering from head to foot, and felt helpless and blue. What could he do but make his escape without having absolutely pledged himself to silence?

"If I did promise to keep your secret," he said, "it would have to be on one condition. You must let me do what I can to help you, and to make some amends."

He stopped in the hesitating sentence, for he encountered her scornful glance. "I don't think I understand," she said. "Are you offering to *pay* me for giving up Ernest? I think we may as well say good-bye now, I

needn't keep you in the cold any longer." Something in her look made Theophilus sure that his misery must be very evident indeed. "Only, Mr. Fletcher, I hope you quite see that any interference between Ernest and myself will be worse than useless. You wished to part us, and you did it. You may as well be content with that, for you cannot bring us together again."

Repulsed, scorned, and numb with cold, Thorpe Fletcher still saw that haunting phantom of justice, and did his best to follow it. He tried to say that perhaps—at some future time—if she should think better of it—and found himself in the act of being ceremoniously shown out of the vault-like room. The sky outside was heavy with coming snow, and with one glance at it he hurried home, and called to Dorcas for a big log for the fire. Long and deeply did he meditate, with eyes fixed on the crackling blaze, and hands softly rubbed in the delicious warmth. A great thing had befallen Thorpe. He—who never doubted his ability to rule the world in the best possible way, if people would only listen to him and to common sense—was not absolutely certain that he had improved matters by meddling with Ernest and Lizzie. And as he still thought that common sense was on his side, he sat wondering whether, by any possibility, there could be something in life not to be ruled by common sense, as he understood it.

## VI

Two years and a half of the life, to which Lizzie looked forward so despairingly, had passed away, and Lesborough lay broiling in the August sun. The Misses Fletcher panted and fanned themselves, opened windows which had long been closed, and would almost have proposed to sit in the garden, had it not been as parched and shadeless as the desert. The poplar beyond the wall quivered in the haze of heat. To Lizzie, toiling wearily through the dust, the hot sunshine seemed very pitiless; and she wanted pity, for things were not going well with her. The little Crofts were supposed to have grown beyond her teaching, and had been sent to a boarding-school; and though the grocer's wife loudly proclaimed that she could speak very 'ighly of Miss Grey, the recommendation was of little service. Lizzie gave a few lessons here and there, and imparted a smattering of French to the baker's daughter; but that was all she did, for it really seemed as if no one in Lesborough had any little children needing a daily governess, except Mrs. Bradley, of Park Villa. She had three charming little girls, and, only a few weeks earlier she had asked—almost entreated—Miss Grey to take charge of them, offering a singularly liberal salary. But Lizzie, for no apparent reason, had declined the situation—civilly, but rather coldly. It was incomprehensible, but it was not so easy to understand Lizzie in

these later days. She was altered in face and manner ; her great gray eyes looked even larger than of old, and seemed to have grown darker since the happy light had died out of them. Some people said she had gone off very much, and looked old for her age ; but others thought her handsomer than ever, as she went by with a look on her face that was at once haughty and patient. The years that had passed had been even drearier than she had feared, but her resolution was unchanged. She had a curious liking for the old red-brick bridge. Now that she had so much leisure she would often walk that way, and if she found herself alone there, she would lay her hand almost caressingly on the low wall.

Theophilus Fletcher had prospered greatly during these two years. The Lesborough foundry was far more important than his predecessor ever dreamed of making it. Trade received a new impulse from the throng of grimy workmen, who apparently looked on wages as manna, and thought it would be impious distrust to save a farthing. Fletcher's patent harrows and thrashing-machines were widely advertised ; and as the big man shouldered his way through the crowd on market days, people made room for him with ever-increasing respect. He interested himself in local reforms, he gave liberally to local charities, and the grounds of his handsome house were always open for flower-shows or school treats. The Rector found him a valuable ally, and he gradually began to make his way into the most exclusive circle of Lesborough society. Mr. Staunton, the Member, whose estates were encumbered, whose family was large, and whose manners were consequently bland, saw that Fletcher might be a power in the coming election, and paid court to him accordingly. Mrs. Staunton was lavish of her smiles ; Miss Staunton was very gracious. She had taken rank as the beauty of the



family ten or twelve years earlier, and had been so hard to please that at twenty-nine she found herself still Miss Staunton of Lesborough Park, with five half-sisters, who had passed from the nursery to the schoolroom, threatening a speedy termination to her reign. She tried her well-worn fascinations on the commercial millionaire, partly from habit, but with a hesitating idea that something might come of it. She shrank from the possibility, and yet it fascinated her with its mixture of splendour and degradation. Theophilus never suspected this, but he met her half-way. It was not his nature to be reserved or frigid with a pretty girl who amused him, and who, in his opinion, was very well able to take care of herself. He was flattered by the Stauntons' civility, and so heart-whole that he could enjoy Ellinor's little attentions. He meant nothing at all, and she was not sure that she meant anything, but nevertheless the Lesborough gossips began to talk.

Lizzie Grey heard the reports as she went on her way, but she took no apparent heed of them. What was Mr. Fletcher to her? It was true that she saw him occasionally at his sisters' house. She went there as of old, and heard the Misses Fletcher boast about Ernest, who was at Oxford, they said, and intimate with the nobility. She used to listen with a faint smile. He had taken his uncle's name on succeeding to the property, and was Ernest Vaughan now. This small fact seemed to part the present time from the bygone days when Ernest Fletcher loved her. The little parlour seemed shadowy and strange, even when Theophilus came in, with jovial laugh and keen blue eyes, straight from the open air of his busy everyday world. He was good-humoured and cordial, though he did not say much to her, and never alluded to their useless compact. But one night Lizzie was weary and depressed. She

listened helplessly to Selina and Caroline as they retailed the latest scandal, but through it all she was conscious that her life had come to a dreary pause, and that hope, energy, and courage had all ebbed together. Suddenly there was a loud knock at the door; Selina stopped short in the middle of a spiteful comment, and Mr. Fletcher came in.

"At tea?" he said, as he threw himself into the easy-chair. "Well, yes, you may give me a cup."

Lizzie, who was cutting bread and butter, knew that he had looked at her when they shook hands, and she valiantly endeavoured to meet his glance as gaily as of old. But she was startled when he turned, fixed his eyes on her face, and remarked abruptly: "I saw you to-day, Miss Grey."

"Did you?" she said, beginning to cut another slice. "I didn't see you."

"No, I know you didn't." A guilty colour mounted to her cheek, but she made no answer. "I saw you on the old red bridge—I say, take care!"

The warning came too late; the knife had slipped and cut her hand. She muffled it quickly in her handkerchief, and looked up defiantly. "It's nothing!" she said, angry with herself for the mischance.

But the cut, though not serious, was deep; and the blood was flowing. Miss Selina ran aimlessly about, proposing sugar, cold water, rag, lily leaves. "No, no!" Miss Caroline exclaimed, "a door-key down her back! I *know* that's the best thing. I've always heard that a door-key—or is that when your nose bleeds?"

"Rubbish!" said Thorpe, "a bit of plaster!" And before Lizzie knew what he was doing he had thrust his sisters aside, had taken possession of her wounded hand, and was unfolding the handkerchief. A glance sent Selina and Caroline flying in different directions for plaster, and for a moment the two were left alone, and face to face.

No word was said, but Lizzie was strangely conscious of the firm pressure of his fingers, and was conscious of nothing else. How long was it before the sisters rushed in with their respective plaster-cases?

"I can manage it now, thank you!" she said hastily.

"So you think," he replied. "I suppose you thought you could cut bread and butter. I'll do both for you to-night."

As Lizzie sat in enforced idleness, and drank the tea which he brought, it seemed to her as if a measure of new strength and defiant courage had come back to her. She laughed and talked more like her old self, though she would not encounter those watchful eyes. The hands of the little clock on the chimney-piece went hurrying round, till Mr. Fletcher glanced at it, started, compared it with his great gold watch, and said he must go. Lizzie perceived that it was the time at which she usually left, but she felt that it would be like asking for his escort if she announced her departure when he had just spoken; so she waited, wondering why on earth he waited. At last, after leaning back some time in frowning silence, he stretched himself, said, "Well, I suppose I must be off," and did not stir. Lizzie, determined to outstay him, talked on, till Miss Caroline yawned openly, and so compelled her to give way. But when she would have said "Good-night" to Mr. Fletcher, he stood up. "Why, I'm going too," he said, "I'll see you home." She tried to refuse, but Selina hurried her off that she might not keep him waiting. Gentlemen didn't like to be kept waiting, she explained to Lizzie as they went upstairs. Lizzie was soon ready, and a minute later she found herself in the moonlit street with Thorpe.

The pair went a few steps in silence, till a sudden impulse made the girl look up. The light fell on her

companion's face, and showed her that he was looking at her, from under his heavy brows, with a direct intensity which sent a shock through her from head to foot.

"Take my arm," he said.

She shook her head, and walked more quickly.

"Miss Grey, what is amiss? Are you well?"

She was astonished. "Yes, I'm very well."

"You mean it? You are not ill, really?"

"Of course I mean it! Thank you for your kind inquiries, Mr. Fletcher, but I am perfectly well."

"Then something else is the matter; you are unhappy." She took no notice, and after a moment he went on, in low tones which were even more imperious for their self-restraint: "Answer me, Miss Grey; are you unhappy?"

They had reached her door as he spoke. She was silent still, but not with the silence which would have been an admission of unhappiness. She gathered all her strength, and met his eyes with a look of inquiry and defiance.

"No answer?" he said. "No concern of mine, of course. Oh, you are quite right, Miss Grey—your happiness wasn't in the bargain, was it?" And muttering something under his breath he walked away without a word of farewell. Lizzie looked after him while she stretched out her hand, groping for the door-handle. What right had he to ask about her happiness—he, of all men in the world! "But this will be the end of it," she said to herself. "He will be offended now."

Theophilus, however, was not easily repulsed. He tried to work upon his sisters' feelings, and arouse their generosity. He remarked how obliging and useful Miss Grey was—didn't they ever make her a little present? Miss Caroline explained to him that the advantage was really on Miss Grey's side. "You see, Theophilus, she

always has her tea every time she comes, and that is something."

"Is it?" said he. "I call it as near nothing as a meal can be."

"Oh, we don't expect you gentlemen to care for early tea, and of course Miss Grey hasn't your appetite."

"Lucky for Miss Grey. But I didn't mean eating and drinking. I thought if you liked to make her a little present—it needn't come out of your pockets." He coloured up as he spoke, but Miss Caroline was looking at a minute hole in the tablecloth, and did not see it.

"You are very kind. But there is no occasion, really," she said.

When, however, she repeated the conversation to her sister, Miss Selina, though generally approving, inclined to think that it might be well to give Lizzie Grey a trifle. "Theophilus will like to see that we follow his advice," she said. "Just a trifle, you know ; more would be absurd." Miss Caroline agreed, looked up a squirrel-skin muff which she did not want, put a fresh lining in it, and gave it to Lizzie on her birthday, at the beginning of July. Miss Fletcher, having as it were committed herself to a more liberal policy, went to the shop and bought a small box with a view of Loch Katrine outside, and three reels of cotton within, which was duly presented at the same time. Theophilus heard of these gifts, and doubtless rejoiced at the success of his scheme.

It so happened that Lizzie saw no more of him till the beginning of August, when a bazaar was held for the Lesborough Church Schools. She had a glimpse of him then, as she passed the Town Hall late in the afternoon. The Stauntons' carriage waited outside, and, as she walked, she looked at the beautiful, impatient, chestnut horses, sleek and shining in the sun, and listened to the music of

the military band within. Not till her shabby gown almost brushed the splendour of silk did she perceive the great Mrs. Staunton, with her electioneering smile, escorted by Theophilus in all his glory. Her primrose fingers rested on his sleeve, and his face was radiant. Lizzie remembers him to this day, as he stood on the lowest step, the thick gold chain, which Ernest hated, glistening in the hot sunshine, the pale gray gloves, the crimson rosebud in his coat. Had she not been taken by surprise she would have turned away, but he had seen her, their eyes had met, and instead of the good-humoured nod, which he often bestowed upon her, he lifted his hat with a ceremonious yet eager politeness which challenged Mrs. Staunton's attention. She looked after Lizzie with lofty wonder, and a faint involuntary admiration, lost the thread of what she was saying, bade Mr. Fletcher farewell a little absently, and drove off, sighing at the idea that a wealthy man should have such threadbare acquaintances.

Mrs. Staunton rather liked him than otherwise—in fact, she liked him well enough to say “Really! I’m very sorry,” when a few days later a rumour ran through the town that he was mixed up in some foreign speculation and had lost money. People hardly knew what to think, but looked doubtfully at one another. It was so unlikely that they could not believe any one could have invented it. And when Mrs. Staunton expressed her languid sympathy, her husband merely replied, “I should say it wasn’t true; but if it is, the man must be a fool. Literally coining money at that place of his, I’m told.”

“Well, I daresay we shall hear more soon,” she said. “Didn’t you say we must give another dinner?” and she passed easily to the more interesting topic.

Lizzie Grey heard nothing of the report. Perhaps she was hardly in the mood to listen to Lesborough talk just then,

for her prospects were darkening from day to day. The baker's daughter, having discovered that she knew French enough to give her a fine sense of superiority to her friends, had discontinued her lessons, and her teacher was left more hopeless than before. While Mrs. Staunton was arching her brows over the tidings of Thorpe Fletcher's losses, Lizzie sat by her mother's bedside, trying to impart a courage she could not feel. "I shall die in the workhouse," moaned Mrs. Grey.

"No, no!" said Lizzie. "It cannot come to that." But she trembled as she said it, and lay awake half the night, tormented with visions of sombre possibilities. It was in no sanguine frame of mind that she prepared to go out the next morning. She was just starting when the little girl, who waited on the invalid during her absence, came to her with a breathless message, "Please, Miss, Missis wants to speak to you. And, please, Miss, will you come at once, Missis says."

"Why, what on earth——" Lizzie began, as she dashed past the child into her mother's room. "What *is* the matter, mamma?"

Mrs. Grey was sitting up in bed, with shining eyes, and a faint tinge of colour in her cheeks. "I was praying to God last night, and He has heard me. Lizzie, look!" And she held out a blue envelope, at the sight of which Lizzie stood rooted to the ground.

"A man left it at the door, Sarah says; a young man she does not know. Who could it be? Oh, Lizzie, do you see what it is?"

"Yes," said the girl slowly. "But we can't keep it, mamma."

"Not keep it? It is meant for us—look at the envelope—it is directed to me!" Mrs. Grey's words came in startled gasps.

"I know it is sent to you," said Lizzie. "But you must let me take it back."

"Back!—who sent it then?"

"Mr. Fletcher." The name came out with a painful effort. "He has sent me money before—more than once—and I have sent it back."

Mrs. Grey stared blankly. "What, Ernest Fletcher—no, he's Vaughan now, isn't he? Do you mean him?"

"No. Mr. Theophilus Fletcher at the foundry. Miss Fletcher's half-brother."

"Why does he send it? I suppose he wants to make you some return for your attentions to his sisters. Oh, Lizzie, we can't send it back!"

"Listen, mamma!" cried Lizzie in despair. "Two years ago I happened to serve Mr. Fletcher—you must not ask me how, because it is not my secret only—at least he will have it that I served him, and ever since then he has been trying to pay me in some way. And because I would not have his money he has sent it to you. He is good, he means it kindly, but I can't take his money. Don't ask me why, mamma, but let me give it back—I can't take it!"

"But it is mine!" cried the poor weak woman. "He sent it to me!" And a dangerous look came into her eyes, as if she would do battle for her treasure with her shaking hands. Lizzie drew back a step and looked sadly at her.

"It is mine!" Mrs. Grey repeated, in her thin voice. "I shall keep it for your sake. You shall not have to work yourself to death for me."

"Then, mother, you will not keep me. I cannot share it. I have no claim on him. He thinks I lost something through him, but I know it wasn't so. I *can't* be paid for that day," she added, half to herself. "Oh, mamma, we have never had a quarrel before!"



But Mrs. Grey was not easily conquered. The poor woman clung to her prize as if she were in the agony of drowning, and this a saving rope. "Mamma!" cried Lizzie, with streaming eyes, "I *can* work! I *will* work! You shall not want! It would kill me if I had to live on Mr. Fletcher's charity!"

It was a hard struggle. On Mrs. Grey's side were feeble arguments, and strong entreaties and tears, and in answer the patient voice pleading, "I can't take it. He owes me nothing at all." At last it was over, and Lizzie came out. She had the blue envelope in her hand; she was going to return it that afternoon, and her mother had kissed her as she stooped to say "Good-bye."

"Was I cruel?" she said to herself, when she was once more in her own room. She went to the window. The poplar was trembling in the summer breeze, and below lay the strip of garden down which Ernest used to come in the days which seemed so long ago. "I hope I wasn't cruel," she thought, leaning out to cool her aching eyes. "I have done nothing for him. He thinks it was a sacrifice, and I thought so too once. But I can't make money out of that; it would be a lie, and I should die of shame!"

## VII

THE foundry stood a little way out of Lesborough, and the way to it led through the ugliest and most uninteresting part of the neighbourhood. Mr. Fletcher said it was a good level road, and he couldn't see anything amiss with it. Still, let him say what he would, it was not beautiful that August afternoon. On both sides, parted from it by low banks and closely-cut hedges, lay meadows, marshy and wide, coarsely overgrown with yellowish-green grass, and dotted here and there with patches of rank weeds, and tall flower-stalks whose blossom was gone. Trees there were none, except a straggling line of alders and willows which marked the river's languid course. No road is pleasant when one travels on a disagreeable errand; but Lizzie found an especial dreariness in this one, as she turned into it, and saw it visible in its flat monotony almost to the foundry-gate. She felt that she could not risk a repetition of that morning's conflict, nor the chance that another gift might arrive, and be accepted without her knowledge. She must refuse Mr. Fletcher's money in terms about which there could be no mistake. She could not wait for a chance meeting, since it might not occur for weeks, and he would think all the while that she had taken his bounty. There was no help for it; she must go to his office and find him there. And the road was so cruel, it kept the end of her journey continually before her. Every

step brought her visibly nearer to that dreaded interview the mere thought of which made her heart die within her, yet the way was so wearily long. She walked as fast as she could, conning over the words she meant to say, with an uneasy certainty that Mr. Fletcher's eyes would frighten every syllable out of her head. If ever she feared him in old days, she feared him ten times more now.

At last she reached her destination. She wondered at her own calmness as she passed through the gate; and, following the guidance of a painted hand, walked straight into the office. "Is Mr. Fletcher here?" she asked a clerk. "Will you tell him that I particularly want to speak to him? I will not keep him long." It seemed to her as if, in uttering the words, she had contrived for a moment to outstrip her own nervousness, and it overtook her exactly as she ceased to speak. She felt the hot colour in her cheeks, and the eager beating of her heart made it hard to catch the man's reply. But she knew that she gave her name, and that a white-faced lad, whom they called Bates, went upstairs to ask if Mr. Fletcher were disengaged. The civil clerk gave her a chair, and she sat, looking through the open window into the busy, grimy yard. A man, who seemed to be a farmer, came in, and looked curiously at her as he went by. He leaned on the desk and spoke, and the clerk glanced at her over the newcomer's shoulder, and smiled as he answered. Why had she ever come? She would have run away, but she had a wild idea that the clerks and the farmer would think her mad and follow her, shouting, till Bates, and Thorpe Fletcher himself, would come thundering down the uncarpeted stairs to join in the pursuit. She waited in an agony of suspense till Bates returned, and asked her to step upstairs. She followed him with desperate courage. He ushered her

into Mr. Fletcher's room in silence, and closed the door after her.

It was a small room, bright and sunshiny. Thorpe had been building extensively at the foundry, and his office, which was only temporary, gave a general impression of new boards. Lizzie advanced a step towards the table, which was covered with papers, and then saw him standing at the window. He turned and came towards her, with a doubtfully inquiring look. "Nothing the matter, I hope, Miss Grey? Pray sit down."

"There is nothing the matter, only I wanted to speak to you. I won't keep you a minute."

"You are always welcome to as much of my time as can be of any service to you," said Fletcher, apparently reassured, and anxious to reassure her. He resumed his former position by the window, a position in which the light did not fall on his face, but whence he could look sideways at the Lesborough road.

Lizzie pulled out the envelope. "Mr. Fletcher, you sent that."

He glanced at it, and nodded in the most matter-of-fact way possible, but his eyes went quickly back to the ribbon of dusty white which lay across the level fields.

"I have brought it back," she said, puzzled at his manner. "Pray don't send any more."

"You don't want it?" He tapped the pane with restless fingers.

"No."

"You have found a situation which suits you, perhaps?" he went on, this time looking straight out of the window and fairly turning his back upon her.

Lizzie, perplexed and nervous, had half-forgotten what she meant to say. His question put the clue into her hands once more.

"No, I haven't. I did hear of one, and when I went to ask about it, I found it was only another way of living on your alms."

"The idiotic woman! She overdid it, I suppose," growled Thorpe, manifestly disconcerted, but without the faintest attempt at disguise.

"I am sure she tried to keep your secret, Mr. Fletcher. But you have taught me to suspect any good fortune, I think."

His answer was an inarticulate grunt. He still kept his back to her. It was very disagreeable to have to address her remarks to his shoulders and what she could see of the back of his head, which he held down doggedly. The one idea conveyed by the outline of those shoulders was that of inert and ponderous obstinacy. But she continued, passionately determined to pierce his armour in some way or other :

"Mr. Fletcher, I am tired of this. When will you leave off persecuting me? You sent me money, I returned it to you. You persisted again and again. Then you leagued yourself with that woman to cheat me into taking your charity." (At this point the big shoulders became a little more expressive, for they were shrugged.) "What have I done that I should be paid for it, with a bank-note thrown to me every now and then? And what business have you to pay me? I have done nothing for you. What I did, I did because I thought it was right. I am quite content, and you have nothing to do with it. Still you might have gone on, and it would not have mattered. I could have gone on returning your presents. But why did you send this to my mother?"

She did not pause to hear some muttered words which sounded remarkably like, "Thought she might have more sense than you had."

"You would have enlisted my own mother on your side against me!" said Lizzie, in accents of bitter reproach; "when we never had a real difference in our lives."

"Oh!" said Thorpe, "then she had more sense?"

"Yes, if you choose to call it so. Yes; she wanted to take your charity for my sake. But I told her that she must choose between it and me, that I wouldn't touch the bread she bought with it, nor live in the house that was maintained with your gifts. I told her that I had no claim on you, that I had done nothing for you, given up nothing for you, and that I would never be a pensioner of yours."

"So the old lady sent it back?" Thorpe questioned, in a curiously gentle voice.

"Yes; here it is," said Lizzie. Having expected either persuasion or rough words, she did not know what to make of this calmness. His face was still obstinately turned to the window.

"Put it on the table, anywhere, it doesn't matter. I shan't offend in that way again."

"Thank you," said Lizzie.

"Probably not in any way."

Lizzie laid the guilty blue envelope on the table, and hesitated. He had spoken the last words with a certain bitterness of emphasis; what did he mean? She had wished to make him understand her inflexible determination, but she did not want to part in anger. She would have held out her hand to him and gone her way, but for an absurd little difficulty. What was the good of holding out her hand to that broad gray-coated back? And speech had become difficult again. Now that she had ended the sort of understanding which had existed between them, and, no doubt, offended him for ever, she hardly understood her own confused and warring feelings. Only she was conscious of a lurking something, which she would die

rather than reveal, and which a word might betray. Better shake hands and go. But he still stood at the window, with his back towards her and his head bowed down. She had hesitated only for a couple of minutes, but all at once she started, feeling as if she had been waiting for ages in the silent sunshiny room. As if she had known the little office in some previous existence, and had stood there, precisely the same, on some occasion, say a million years before. As if everything else were a dream, or as if that were a dream, she hardly knew which. As if—but Thorpe Fletcher drove all the rest out of her head by turning round and facing her.

“What are you stopping for?” he demanded, in his roughest tone. “You want nothing from me, you would die sooner than let me serve you in any way ; you hate me—you say so.”

She attempted a denial, and held out her hand, but he ignored it.

“No ; as you have stayed you shall listen to me for a moment, since I’ve had to listen to you.”

“Mr. Fletcher, are you ill? Is anything the matter?” she exclaimed. As soon as she saw him in the full sunlight, she perceived that he was haggard and anxious. She started as she met his eyes. Though keen and clear, they were small, and overshadowed by his heavy brows, but that day there was a fierce spark of fire burning in their grayish-blue.

“Ill?” he repeated. Lizzie Grey could not know it, but the Thorpe of twenty years earlier had come to the surface again, and confronted her that day. “Am I ill? Is anything wrong? What the devil is it to you, Miss Grey, whether there is or not? It’s good manners to ask, I suppose ; but you know well enough you don’t care. However, you shall hear, since you *have* asked.” He took

a turn or two up and down the little room, with the old effect that there seemed to be no place for any one else in it. Lizzie drew back a step to let him pass. He halted instantly. "Why don't you sit down? 'What's the good of tiring yourself after your walk?"

"Thank you, I'd rather stand," said Lizzie.

"Stand, then!" was the rough rejoinder. "Look here, Miss Grey; I'd give my right hand to have been miles away two years ago, instead of coming here to meddle with your affairs. I can't see now what I did wrong; it seems to me that no one with any sense could have done otherwise. But everything went crooked; I'd better have let it alone altogether."

"Oh, don't let us have all the old story over again!" said Lizzie. "Mr. Fletcher, I don't blame you, I never blamed you; pray don't say any more about it."

Thorpe turned upon her: "But I choose to say something about it. It's the last time—can't you have a little patience? Whether I did right or wrong, I ruined your prospects; you can't deny that. I ruined you—*you*, of all people in the world! I'm not going to talk about love at first sight, or any of the stuff they put in poetry. When I came to Lesborough I hadn't thought of marrying, at least not for a good while; I had other things to see after. But I soon began to think of it—I believe it was partly because I was sorry for what I'd done, and I wanted to do what I could to make it up to you." Lizzie looked blankly at him, struck dumb by this singular frankness. "But you were so brave," he went on, "and behaved so uncommonly well, that I saw the luck would be on my side instead of yours. Only, when I'd made up my mind that you were the one girl in all the world for me, and that if I couldn't have you I'd have no one, I couldn't tell you so. I kept thinking, suppose Ernest should come back, I should never



forgive myself if I'd ruined it all again. (There, don't say anything, let me finish. Didn't I tell you it was the last time?) Not that I thought you would be happy with him; I never did. But you had a right to choose for yourself. So I waited, and worked, and said to myself that you should be richer as my wife than if you had married Ernest with his estate. Only, as I knew things were not going very well with you, I tried to help you, just to keep your head above water till we should see what the boy would do. You wouldn't let me. I tried again, and I found out how it was: you hadn't forgiven my blundering, you weren't generous enough to let me do anything for you. Then I *did* try to help you without your knowing, but it seems you were too sharp for me——"

"Mr. Fletcher!" cried Lizzie.

"*Can't* you have patience for five minutes?" he demanded. "I suppose you think I'm a rich man? I don't know whether I am, or whether I'm ruined. I've done well enough here, but it was too slow for me; so I risked it for you. I meant to come straight to you if all went well—of course it would have been no good."

"You have failed, then?" said Lizzie, advancing a step, with a new light in her eyes.

"You needn't be in such a hurry," he replied. "I tell you I don't know. But I heard something yesterday—what does it matter to you? Only if it's true there'll be a smash here—this place shut up, and all my men out of work. My God! what a fool I've been!" he said, with a quick little gasp. "Ah, well! you'll read it all in the next *Lesborough* paper, I daresay. Young Marshall promised me a telegram." He glanced at the road as he spoke. "But what do you care? Only you see how well you chose your time to reproach me and fling my money in my face. I want you to see that. Ernest will never come

back now—never. And if I'm beggared, it would have been a pity for me to think that I had helped you a little till I could make a fresh start—wouldn't it? No! I'd better begin the world again at forty, knowing that I've lost all for nothing; that I've ruined you and myself too; that you hate me, that you would rather starve—and it will come to that, I daresay—than touch a coin of mine, rather go to the workhouse than let me help you. Very well, be it so." He turned to the window again. "I'm sick of it all!" he said in a low voice; "I can do no more—I give up."

Quick as thought Lizzie sprang to the table and caught up the blue envelope. "Mr. Fletcher! I've taken it!"

He looked round. "Taken what?"

"This!" and holding it up, she went on in a voice which wavered wildly between laughing and crying: "Good-bye, Mr. Fletcher, and thank you! I'm going to spend it—may I?"

"What do you mean?" said Thorpe. "'Take it—only—are you in earnest? Do you see that it isn't quite the same? No, no! don't say anything! Take it, in God's name! without conditions. When the news comes——"

She pointed to the window: "Is that your messenger?" she said, growing suddenly calm.

"Yes!" said Fletcher. "Three minutes, and I shall know. If I escape this time, I'll run no more risks; and you'll let me come and say what I can for myself, won't you?"

"No!" and Lizzie looked straight into his eyes. "If you do come I shall refuse to see you."

His face fell. "You will not see me?" he stammered, in utter bewilderment.

"No! If you want to say anything to me, you may say it here, and now."

"Now?"

"Before that message comes; after that you needn't trouble yourself. I mean what I say."

"But, *now*?" said Thorpe. "I tell you I may be a beggar."

"A good thing too!" she exclaimed. "You think of nothing but money. You are always harping on the money I should have had if I'd married Ernest; then you begin hoarding yours for me—I hate it! and now you insult me, yes, insult me! by promising to come—if all goes well! I suppose I'm a toy you will like to buy if you are rich? and if you are poor, perhaps some one else——"

There was a noise as of an arrival below.

"Lizzie, don't tempt me. Suppose the worst—I'm not so young as I was, I'm twice your age, child; there's not much chance for me—I should do you a cruel wrong."

"I don't tempt you. Here comes your message. I mean what I say—but you know that of old."

She drew back a little and watched him; her face was grave, defiant, intent. Theophilus turned on his heel, and took a step or two irresolutely. Bates appeared, laid a telegram on the table, and vanished discreetly.

Fletcher came forward, but Lizzie's hand was on it. She looked up at him, he was white to his lips. "Will you have it?" she said.

"How much more harm am I to do?" he asked. "If you would only let me help you!" Their eyes met: "Lizzie, I'm a selfish brute, but will you share it, good or bad?"

Ten minutes later she was saying, a little regretfully, "I almost wish you had been poor for a few years at first."

"Thanks!" he said, passing his hand over his forehead, and looking down at her with a smile. Only by the sense of present relief could he realise what his fear had been.

"A few years! You can afford to talk like that. How old are you? Twenty? Twenty-one?"

"Twenty-two—at least I soon shall be."

Thorpe smiled. "Well, I didn't mind talking in that style when I was one and twenty; but, now that more than half my life is gone, I'm willing enough to work, but not to fight my way through the crowd to get my foot on the lowest round of the ladder again. I like to look forward to the end; I like to feel that I needn't pinch and save. I like good wine and good dinners; I didn't care what I had at one and twenty."

"I didn't want you to be poor for very long," said Lizzie; "just a little while. You might have had plenty of good dinners"—this very scornfully—"afterwards."

"You're very kind, but as I can't dine more than once a day I don't see how I could make up for lost time. No, no, Lizzie! you must take me as I am. I daresay it might be very nice to live in a cottage with you to cook for me, but I shan't be easy till things are made safe, and I know that there isn't a chance of this bargain of ours turning out as badly for you as the one we made two years and a half ago."

But Lizzie Grey did not seem to think that bargain had turned out badly for her. Something was lost with that first dream, no doubt, something of springtime had vanished, but there was no shadow of regret in her happy eyes that day.

It was easy to tell the great news to Mrs. Grey, but Thorpe and Lizzie went together, a day or two later, to communicate it to Selina and Caroline. Thorpe tried to make a neat little speech, and to present Lizzie as a new—but he broke down when he realised that the sentence ought to end with "sister." It was too absurd, so he coughed, and finished rather lamely—"a new relation, you know." The Misses Fletcher were astounded and dis-

pleased, and said they were delighted, and had foreseen it from the first. They fondled Lizzie, and kissed her tenderly, while Thorpe sat on the sill of the open window, and looked on with twinkling eyes. He did not like it so well when his own turn came.

"Come into the garden for five minutes, Lizzie," he said a little later. But his sisters detained her, to ask if she wouldn't put something more on, and to hang about her, as if she were going on an expedition of some difficulty and possible danger, and they could hardly bear to risk their treasure. At last she escaped, and ran out, to find Thorpe leaning against the door which led into the garden, and talking to Dorcas.

"Ah, here you are!" he said. They went down the path together, and paused when they came to the little space at the end. Lizzie pointed upwards. "That is my window."

"Ah!" said Thorpe. "I see. Very handy."

He leaned against the wall, and looked up at the little window with its glittering panes. The steep red roof which caught the western glow, the two or three pigeons perched upon its ridge, the poplar, hardly stirring in the still air, all stood keenly out against the pale blue sky, and Fletcher studied them as if he were learning them by heart. "I'm going to ask you a question," he said at last, "and I want you to tell me the truth."

She answered with a happy smile, "Do you know, Thorpe, I hope it won't be very inconvenient, but I'm afraid I shall never be able to tell you anything else. I might, perhaps, if you would shut your eyes, but not when you look at me so."

"Hm! I think you managed to keep me in the dark pretty well," he rejoined. "If I'd known, I might have come and looked after you a little sooner."

"Instead of my having to come to you! But what is your question?"

"Isn't this where Ernest used to come?"

She nodded, growing suddenly grave.

"I know you care for me now," said Thorpe; "I shan't ask you that. But suppose I had never come to Lesborough at all, never interfered with you and Ernest, you might have been very happy."

"Perhaps," looking at the ground as she spoke.

Thorpe laid his great hand on her shoulder. "If everything had gone well, don't you think in your heart that that would have been best of all? Your first love, nearer your own age, and I know how you cared for him. Tell me, child," this very gently—"I can't be happy unless I can get to the bottom of things—tell me the truth, don't you think that might have been the best? You needn't be afraid. Don't think I shall be angry. I shall only want to do more to make you some amends for what I can't give you now."

"Then," said Lizzie, still without looking up, "I'm afraid you won't take so much trouble about me, for oh, Thorpe, I am very glad you came!"

THE END













